CAPITOL

OFFENSE

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

TONY GIBBS

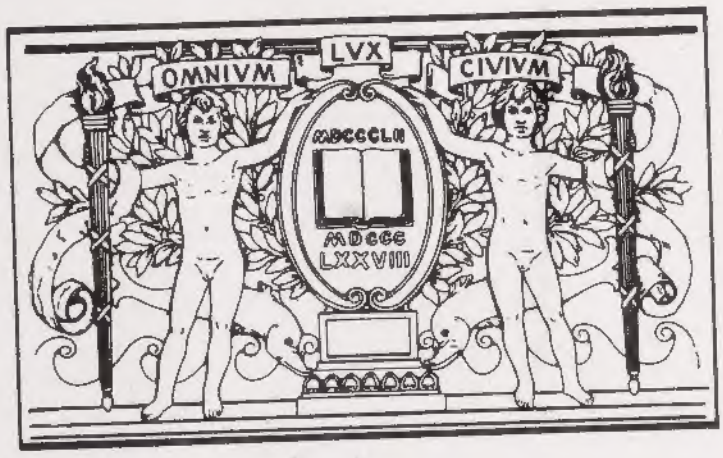
$19.95 ($23.95 in Canada)

Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* calls the writing of Tony Gibbs "unpredictable and suspenseful." In *Shadow Queen*, his first Diana Speed novel, he mixed a new series sleuth and a head-spinning, original plot. Now Gibbs brings back the beautiful Diana Speed, a New York publisher's chief financial officer with a background in government intelligence. Her assignment here is to "follow the money" in a chilling case of dirty politics and the politics of dirty movies, a case that has given someone a four-letter reason for revenge.

CAPITOL OFFENSE

To Diana's calculating eye, the new assistant editor at Wild-Freeman Publishing looks more like a prizefighter than a bookman. To the rest of the staff, he looks like her lover. In fact, Eric Szabo is a burned-out security expert recently back from a long embrace with Johnny Walker. He's been secretly hired by the company's owner, the reclusive billionaire Roger Channing, and the assignment is Szabo's last chance to be more than a rent-a-cop.

Szabo has been told only that he's to foil an attack on Channing—an attack that will be coming through Wild-Freeman. Unwilling allies, Diana and Eric have a hunch the threat is linked to the murder of a right-wing Southern congressman outside a Times Square XXX movie house. A faint trail leads them to the nude, bullet-riddled corpse of a small-time porno actor, but the one person who might be able to make all the connections, a kinky producer of live sex shows, has vanished. As Diana and Eric race against time to head off the assassin, a far more shocking plot comes to light—one with literally hundreds of highly placed targets and even the future of the nation at stake.



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CAPITOL OFFENSE

TONY GIBBS

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CAPITOL OFFENSE

1. Fielding

West 49th Street, Manhattan; 9:30 p.m. Friday

On the stained and wrinkled screen, the performers were still writhing in simulated ecstasy as the image faded to black and the houselights came up. Two or three patrons uncoiled and hurried out of the narrow, stuffy theater, their heads lowered. The rest—those who were conscious—sat rigid, staring straight ahead, avoiding each other's eyes.

The old man in the last row surveyed the thinly scattered audience as he waited for the lights to dim again, sourly aware that the drooping brim of his still-damp hat and the turned-up collar of his topcoat made him look like a caricature of the other customers. The tautness of arousal had already slackened, leaving the usual sour residue of shame and disgust.

This was the last time, Philemon Fielding told himself. There was no pleasure left in it, no satisfaction; just the urgency of anticipation and the self-loathing afterward. Face it: he'd become another goddamn addict, but with so much more to lose than the faceless fools around him. Sooner or later somebody was going to recognize him, and then his career—no,

his *life:* forty-five years of public service—would collapse in scorn and jeering.

How they were waiting for him to falter, the limousine liberals and Beltway bleeding hearts. But by God there were even fewer who didn't fear him, and as far as Fielding was concerned, Caligula had got it right: *Oderint dum metuant*—Let 'em hate, so long as they fear. Seniority was Fielding's armor, unpredictability his shield, vitriolic contempt his weapon—and no one in Washington knew better how to use them. The list of his enemies proved his power, whether you went by numbers or eminence. The biggest names in the capital. Hell, the biggest names in the country, maybe the world.

But they were all the same when he got them where he wanted them: in front of the subcommittee, they'd cringe or whine or run for cover. He enjoyed that.

Every once in a while, though, you'd get a scrappy one. Kind of like hooking a largemouth bass after a succession of crappies. The little redheaded gal this afternoon, for instance. Not ugly, not real pretty, too square in the jaw for his taste. Scared (which was only proper), but probably her skin was that kind of pale anyway, living the way she did. Damn hippie slut, calling herself a producer and a performance artist. Thought she was so smart, writing those dirty plays on the taxpayers' dollar; but it hadn't taken much for Wiedle, the subcommittee counsel, to catch her in a lie—and under oath, too. Few months in jail would teach her a thing or two, but a good whipping would be better, the way they used to do to whores like her. Hands tied over her head, bare to the waist, white skin gleaming: that'd be something to see. . . . He pulled his racing mind back from the brink.

Stoughton would want to let her off easy, same as he always did with the females. What he really wanted, of course, was to get in her pants. Hell of a vice chairman he was—worse than half the scum that oozed in front of the subcommittee.

But Stoughton was still young enough to enjoy a woman, the lucky bastard. Fielding's ears still went hot when he thought of his own last attempt: the awkward fumbling, the desperate concentration, and then, when at last he was almost there, her look of bored disgust that reduced him to limp impotence.

So here he was instead—watching it, on a rumpled-up movie screen with a brownish stain in one corner, surrounded by frustrated voyeurs. By *other* frustrated voyeurs, he corrected himself.

On the screen the first feature had begun again, and the heavy-hipped blonde was starting to shuck off her dress. The old man glanced down at his watch: he'd be a little early for the shuttle flight, but he'd already seen the triple bill all the way through, and right now he couldn't bear the thought of a second time. He pulled himself heavily to his feet, edged into the aisle. Stepping slowly to conceal his limp, he pushed through the padded swinging door into the tiny lobby, his face averted from the ticket booth at one side.

This was the second risky moment, the first being when he stepped up to the window and pushed the money—always exact change—at the ticket seller. Inside the theater no one was likely to break the unwritten rule and look directly at another customer's face, but out in the street was different. Other pedestrians stared, and someday one of them would recognize Representative Philemon Fielding, Democrat of Arkansas.

Had to be the last time. By God, it would be. Outside, he could see, the empty pavement was streaming with wet, the wind-driven rain coming down harder than when he'd entered the theater nearly four hours ago. All the better, he thought. His turned-up collar and pulled-down hat wouldn't look like he was hiding his face, and the rare passerby would be less likely to raise his own head for a close look at some pathetic old goat shuffling out of a porno movie.

He pushed the door open and stepped out; exhaust fumes

filled the wet air, and a trace of spoiled food from an overflowing garbage can—but it still smelled cleaner than inside. *We dirty old men have a smell all our own.*

He turned left, pulling his head down into his collar. Damn, that rain was cold, and there wasn't a prayer of getting a cab. Still, it was only a few blocks to Grand Central, where he was sure of getting a taxi or, if that failed, the airbus to La Guardia. (Over time he'd worked out all the routes between Times Square and the air shuttle terminal. Used them all, too.)

The cheap restaurant next to the movie was closed, but someone was standing in the darkened doorway. Probably a harmless wino trying to stay dry, he told himself, but he edged away toward the curb just in case.

He heard the footsteps, quick and light, behind him, and turned awkwardly to meet them. As he pivoted, the wind caught his hat and spun it away.

"I've been waiting for you."

The old man recognized the voice before he could clearly see the speaker. "What d'you want?" He tried for an imperious snarl, but it came out weak and breathless.

"Three guesses."

A car slid past, wet tires sucking at the asphalt. Its headlights momentarily lit the other face. The old man read his sentence in the pitiless eyes; for the first time in his life he was swept by a wave of sheer, unreasoning terror. He turned, awkwardly off balance, back toward the little theater, opening his mouth to cry out. Something hard caught his ankles, scooped his feet out from under him, and he crashed to the pavement. The pain of bruised palms and scraped knees was just welling up when a blow at the back of his neck slammed his face into the wet, rough concrete.

Dazed, still scrabbling to get up, he felt himself being dragged into the restaurant's darkened doorway. A hard knee in his back flattened him again, driving the breath from his gasping lungs.

He struggled to pull free, but he was completely helpless,

pinned to the gritty pavement by the weight riding his shoulder blades. Gloved hands grabbed his chin, pulled up and back, as his arms and legs thrashed feebly. *This can't be happening.*

He clawed desperately at the hands that were dragging his head back and back, but it was no use. *Oh, God, my neck's breaking.* He tried to shout for help, but all he heard, as from a great distance, was a faint, muffled moaning. His strength was nearly gone. *I'm going to die.*

The old man's assailant shifted position, and the terrible strain on his neck eased for an instant. Then the pressure was suddenly, unbearably renewed. "Now," said the calm, cold voice.

2. Brick

LAWRENCE RESIDENTIAL HOTEL, WEST 94TH STREET;
8:00 A.M. SATURDAY

He was walking a narrow, slippery trail along the sheer face of a cliff, and the unexpected chatter of the diamondback's rattle came from just behind him. But part of his mind knew it was dreaming, and he was not surprised when the sound changed to a muted burr that ended in a familiar double click. An instant later he heard his own voice, a little blurry because of the cheap recording tape, but still resonant, rich, sincere, deeply satisfying: "This is Brick Wahl, actor." (Beside him, Magdalen's soft, naked body stiffened: he knew she hated the tape, though he couldn't imagine why.) "I can't answer your call right now, but I sure do hope you'll leave a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Have a real fine day, y'hear?"

Damn, he sounded good. Sometimes, when he was down, he'd call himself up from the pay phone on the corner, just to hear the tape. Uneasy and trying to remember why, he rolled over, stared up at the cracked plaster of the ceiling. He

felt Magdalen's eyes on him, waited for her to start rubbing up against him again. The idea excited him, as it always did. Nothing like an older woman for red-hot loving, he told himself, even if some of the things she demanded of him were pretty kinky, even a little frightening.

The answering machine gave a beep, followed instantly by a very different voice: rasping, nasal, totally New York. "Mag, you there?" it demanded. "Come on, honey, it's me—Sheldon Waterman, your favorite shyster. It's important, so shove that big schmuck off you and answer the goddamn phone."

Frigging Jew lawyer. Brick sat up, pulling back the sheet, but Magdalen was quicker, and the phone was on her side of the Hide-A-Bed. She reached over and hit the speaker button.

"Shelly?" she said. "What's the matter?"

"You seen the papers?" The lawyer sounded worried, and Brick felt a knot of apprehension beginning to form in his own gut.

"For God's sake, it's barely *dawn*," she replied. "Of course I haven't seen the papers." Her voice was muzzy, as if she were still half asleep, but her green eyes were hard and alert.

"He's dead, Mag. The old bastard's dead. Got mugged in Times Square last night—"

Last night, Brick thought. Oh, Christ. Memory flooded in, with panic riding the crest. His face must have showed his feelings because Magdalen threw him a warning look. Taking a deep breath, she pitched her voice to cut through the gabbling on the speaker.

"*Who's* dead, Shelly?"

"Fielding. The congressman. They found him late last night, in the gutter outside a porno movie. Somebody broke his neck." The lawyer paused, and Brick had the sense that he was waiting for Magdalen to say something, but she remained silent. After a long minute he began again, almost pleading: "Mag . . ."

Her left eyebrow arched and the corners of her mouth went up in the small, catlike smile Brick had learned to dread.

"Relax, Shelly, I didn't kill him. But after what he did to me yesterday, I hope he died slowly. In agony."

"Don't *say* that." Waterman's voice rose half an octave in anguished protest. "Don't even think it, sweetheart. This is trouble, big-time."

The lawyer's words knifed straight into Brick's heart, but they were obviously bouncing right off Magdalen. "Did you say they found Fielding in Times Square?" she asked. "What was he doing there?"

"Who knows? But that's not the point, Mag."

"So what *is* the point, Shelly? And don't call me Mag."

"I'll spell it out for you," Waterman said, dropping into the wise-ass tone he so often used on Brick: "Yesterday morning, in Washington, D.C., Representative Philemon Fielding, Democrat of Arkansas, confronts Magdalen Tyrrell, the well-known producer of politico-erotic performance art, and tears her to shreds—"

"He didn't either!" Her eyes were suddenly blazing. "And I got a few pretty good licks in, too."

"—in front of his full subcommittee and a standing-room-only audience," he went on as if she hadn't spoken. "Not to mention the press and live TV." He drew in a breath that rattled the speaker. "And six, eight hours later, that same Congressman Fielding gets himself knocked off only—what?—a couple miles from that same Magdalen Tyrrell's lover's apartment. It makes people think, cops especially."

The knot in Brick's gut had drawn itself up tight, and he was having trouble catching his breath. Magdalen, still watching him from the corner of her eye, stuck out her tongue in annoyance. "Oh, give me a break, Shelly," she said. "A couple of miles in Manhattan isn't exactly around the corner. And how could I know the old bugger was even in town? I doubt the cops'll even bother with me."

"Wrong," said the lawyer, sounding gloomy and pleased with himself at the same time. "They just called, asking me

where to find you, on account of they've been to your apartment, and it's empty."

"So you helpfully told them I was shacked up with one of my actors," she replied. "Thanks a lot." She had let the sheet fall, exposing one soft, white breast. Brick knew she'd done it on purpose, was watching for a reaction from him, but all he felt was almost uncontrollable fear.

"Listen," Waterman was saying. "Better the cops find you without too much trouble, so it doesn't look like you're hiding. When they asked how to get hold of you, I gave them the names of some people in Hecate Limited you might have stayed with. Brick's name I put at the end of the list, to give you a little time to prepare." Another pregnant pause.

"You mean, get my story straight?" she said, her eyes locked on Brick's now, boring into his skull. "No big story to tell: I came here straight from La Guardia. Never left."

Relief was plain in the lawyer's voice: "That's good. And Brick was there, too? The whole time?"

"Brick was here, too," she said deliberately. "The whole time."

* * *

The dusty interrogation room smelled of sweat, fear, and stale smoke. Outside in the hall someone was shouting at someone else, but the detective leaning over Brick didn't even raise his voice. "Okay, Brick, you didn't go out all day," he repeated. "You were in your room in the"—he glanced down at his notes—"the Lawrence Residential Hotel when Magdalen came back from Washington?"

"Like I said. Yes." Listen to the questions, Brick reminded himself. Think before you talk. In the course of his several careers, he had been interrogated by a good many authorities, military as well as civilian. If there was one thing he'd learned, it was how to handle questioners: Never offer information; never change an answer; never let them rattle you.

"How come you didn't go down to D.C. with Magdalen?" asked the second detective, the snotty black one. "Didn't she need some moral support, Brick? She's just a woman, after all—didn't she need her man by her side?"

The cop was trying to put the needle in, and overdoing it. Besides, the idea of Magdalen needing anyone was so dumb it almost made Brick laugh, tense as he was. "Her attorney was there," he replied. "Mr. Waterman."

"But he didn't fly back to New York with her," said the black cop. "I'd've thought Magdalen might want somebody to meet her at La Guardia, after her ordeal. Somebody big and strong—like you, Brick."

He didn't dare let his eyes meet the detective's. "I don't know about that," he said, keeping his voice dull and level. "She didn't ask me." You may be a major dude here in the station house, Brick said to himself. But when you look in a mirror, all you see there is a nigger.

"Now, let's make sure I've got it straight," said the other detective—the friendly one and the more dangerous of the two. "When Magdalen came in, it was four-thirty P.M.—"

"About four-thirty," Brick said. "Maybe a little later."

"Okay: about four-thirty. You were watching this sci-fi movie on the TV, right?"

"*Beastmaster*. That's right."

"What did she do when she came in? Exactly."

Brick drew in a long, slow, time-consuming breath. "She unlocked the door—she's got her own key—and she came in. Took off her raincoat . . ."

"The raincoat, was it wet or dry?" the black cop snapped.

Brick considered the question, one that hadn't been asked before. "A little wet, I guess. Maybe it was dry. I didn't notice."

"She hang it up?"

"Yes."

"Then what?"

"She got herself a beer from the fridge and came over where

I was sitting," he said, visualizing the scene. "She looked at the TV for a minute or two, and went in the bathroom."

"How did she seem?" the friendly cop asked. "Angry? Disturbed? Unhappy?"

"Not real happy," Brick said slowly, and, as the black cop opened his mouth, added, "But not angry that I could see."

"Jesus Christ," the black cop muttered, but the friendly cop went on:

"Did she say anything about what happened in Washington?"

"No," Brick replied slowly. " 'Least I don't think she did."

"What *did* she say, Brick?" The friendly cop was sounding a little frayed. "I mean, she must've said *something*."

"She said she hated movies with animals in them." The black cop's jaw dropped, and Brick addressed the explanation to him: "See, *Beastmaster* is about this guy who can talk to animals, get them to fight for him, and there's lots of animals in it. Anyway, that's when she went into the bathroom."

For a moment Brick thought the black cop was going to lose it, but the other grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him back down onto the chair, never taking his eyes off Brick's face. "You're fucking with us, aren't you, Brick?" he said. He shook his head sadly. "Not a smart move, especially for a guy with your sheet."

He'd been expecting it but hoping just the same. The black cop, smiling with all his teeth now, pitched in: "Yeah, we know all about you, Harley—that's your real name, isn't it: Harley Joshua Wahl. Ought to be Pussy, in my opinion, but we'll settle for Harley."

"And you've been a bad boy, Harley," said the friendly cop, consulting a sheet of computer paper on the battered desk in front of him. "Suspicion of burglary, suspicion of theft—five times—grand theft auto, possession of stolen articles . . ."

"No convictions," Brick muttered.

"Two," the cop corrected him. "But both reversed on appeal." Still talking, he pulled a second sheet from beneath the

first. "And we all know how generous the appeals courts are, don't we? No breaking old men's necks, though. No bodily harm in your MO—no violence at all."

"I hope the public appreciates your restraint, Harley," said the black cop, who'd gotten up and was standing behind Brick's chair. "You steal their shit, but you don't bust them up in the process."

They were leading up to something, Brick realized, and there was only one other place they could go. He took a deep breath, reminded himself that he was absolutely in the clear—and these guys had no jurisdiction, anyway.

"But what's this?" the friendly cop crowed, holding up the second sheet of paper. "Another report from your busy past, Harley. Your army service record, in fact." He shook his head again. "For a guy who looks like a recruiting poster, you sure had a lot of trouble with the brass."

Now that Brick knew what to expect, he could wait for it calmly. "Don't know what you mean," he said.

"Come off it, Harley," the black cop said. "Four and a half years, and never got past E-4?"

"And an unhappy ending, too," said the other. "A dishonorable discharge."

A general discharge, dickhead. Not the same thing at all. But he saw the cop was waiting for him to object, so he shrugged and held his tongue.

"A little hard to figure out the reason," the friendly cop was saying. "The reports aren't exactly clear, but some officer got killed."

"Blown to bits," said the black cop, right in Brick's ear.

Brick knew he should keep his mouth shut, but the words popped out by themselves: "I didn't drop the egg. If you read the report, you know it was Lieutenant Sawyer."

"But you set it up," said the black cop.

"Bullshit," Brick said. "Anyhow, all that's ancient history."

"Oh, right," said the black cop. "These days you're an

ac-tor. You work for Magdalen, don't you, Harley? Just what kind of acting does that involve?"

The black dude was going to scratch all the scabs, Harley knew. And it was going to be painful, not answering back—but it didn't matter, because they were just fishing. If he kept his head, he was home free. And so was Magdalen.

3. Magdalen

LAWRENCE RESIDENTIAL HOTEL; NOON

While the middle-aged detective with the fatherly manner questioned her, his partner—an angular, hard-faced woman in her late thirties—poked at the contents of the two plastic laundry baskets that Brick used alternately as bureau and hamper. "You don't mind if I look at this stuff," she'd said; it was not a question, but Magdalen had replied:

"Help yourself."

The fatherly cop put Magdalen's air shuttle receipt in an envelope and sealed it. "So your plane arrived in La Guardia about three," he repeated.

Brick had warned her this was the way they worked—the same questions, over and over, listening for discrepancies. "No, about two forty-five," she said. "I already told you: My attorney dropped me at the air shuttle just too late for the two o'clock flight, so I got in line for the next one. The planes leave when they're full, and my flight filled up early."

"Washington high rollers getting a head start on the weekend," he remarked with a friendly grin.

She shrugged. Cooperative but noncommittal, she reminded herself. Willing to help, but getting a little bored. "Could be. I wouldn't know."

"And you didn't see Representative Fielding at Washington National?" said the female, looking up from a tangle of Brick's underwear. She had a harsh voice and a terrible Queens accent—her *didn't* came out as *dint*—but with a hatchet face like hers, what did it matter?

"As I said: No. Which isn't to say he wasn't there—the place was jammed." She waited half a beat. "Was Fielding on the three o'clock shuttle?"

Both cops ignored the question. "Did you happen to talk to anybody on the plane?" the fatherly one asked, trying to sound offhand.

"Anybody who might remember me?" Magdalen sketched a rueful laugh that sounded, even to her own critical ear, just right. "Wish I had, but I just wasn't feeling all that talkative."

"Must've been tough," said the female cop, trying to sound sympathetic and failing. "CNN was playing the videotape this morning. I saw how the old—how Representative Fielding worked you over in the hearing."

Both of them were watching Magdalen for a reaction. Their intent eyes only steadied her, and she savored a tiny spurt of triumphant fury. "I wasn't the first," she said. "If you're making a list of Fielding's enemies, you'd better have a big notebook."

"He pretty well ruined you, though," the fatherly one suggested. "I mean, your company"—he glanced down at his notes—"Hecate Limited: it's out of business, right?"

"That's right." The rage that was a second occupant of her body surged suddenly out of control, and she dropped her gaze quickly, let her mind race for a moment. But it was dweebs like you who actually pulled the plug—the health inspector who stole the soap from the men's room and then wrote up a citation, the fire inspector who took his monthly payoff and turned us in anyway, the beat cop who ticketed all the custom-

ers' cars. Washington gave the word, and bastards like you couldn't wait to cut my throat. She shaped a wry smile until it felt convincing, then forced herself to look up. "I beg your pardon—I missed your question."

It was the female, standing at the open closet: "This is the dress you wore at the hearing, isn't it? I remember thinking it looked kind of old for you."

The god-awful print had been Shelly's idea. "We want the folks out in TV land to see someone they can identify with," her lawyer had said. "What I'm thinking, sweetheart, is middle-aged Iowa schoolteacher, recently bereaved."

At the time it was the absolutely final debasement—dressing up like Miss Marple so she could be gnawed to death by weasels. Now . . . "Yes," she said, "that's it." She forced herself to meet the woman cop's eyes. *Don't look at the microwave, Magdalen. Don't even think about looking there.* "That's the dress I wore yesterday."

"It's dry," said the female, addressing her partner.

"That's because it didn't get wet," said Magdalen. "I took a bus from the air shuttle terminal to the subway at Continental Avenue. The A train from Times Square up here—station's two blocks away. Anyway, I had a raincoat. Yes, on the hanger next to the dress."

The fatherly cop was watching her, face expressionless. Don't overdo, she reminded herself. Just answer the question that's asked.

"Shoes?" he asked.

"On the closet floor," she said.

The female picked up the pair of hideous black low heels. "A little damp around the toes," she observed, and to Magdalen: "The underwear?"

"I'm wearing it," Magdalen replied. "Under this track suit of Mr. Wahl's. You want to see?"

The female glanced quickly past Magdalen to her partner and then said, "Yes."

If you have to peel in front of strangers, Magdalen's acting

coach had once said, you've got to believe your body is perfect. It was about then that she'd decided to become a producer. Without a word she got to her feet, eyes fixed on the opposite wall, and slid the warm-up pants down to midthigh. The skimpy black lace panties were far too tight—they were sized for a skinny teenager—but Brick, who had bought them from an ad in the back pages of some T&A magazine, loved them.

She raised the sweatshirt's hem to her neck, suddenly aware of the dampness under her arms. The wired cups of the bra pushed her breasts upward and together, drawing frank appraisal from the no longer quite so fatherly cop. As he surveyed Magdalen's body, his partner watched him, hostility coming off her in waves.

"Satisfied?" said Magdalen after nearly a silent minute.

The fatherly cop seemed on the point of saying something, but the female snapped, "That'll do."

"Maybe I've got the engineering wrong," said the male cop, not looking at either woman, "but don't you wear stockings with a dress? Or tights?"

"Panty hose," said Magdalen and the female cop together. Their eyes met, and for the first time Magdalen thought she saw a tiny spark of empathy.

"They got a bad run," Magdalen explained. "I chucked them."

"They're not in the garbage," said the female cop, suddenly alert again. She looked around her as if considering the room for hiding places.

"They went down the chute with last night's trash," Magdalen said. *Don't sound so anxious. And don't answer so fast.* "They're in the incinerator, I'm afraid."

The male cop threw his partner a meaningful look, and she nodded. He pulled himself heavily to his feet. "I guess that's about it for now, Magdalen. You mind if we borrow these clothes of yours for a few days? Run some routine tests."

"Keep 'em," she replied with a shrug of unconcern. "They don't have a lot of happy memories."

The cop who was writing out a receipt spoke without looking up: "You said that warm-up suit belongs to"—a meaningful pause—"your friend?"

"That's right," said Magdalen, but the cop was looking past her, to his partner.

"Don't you keep some other clothes here? Your own stuff?" the female put in.

The too unconcerned tone would have warned Magdalen in any case, but tension seemed to have lifted her to a new plane of awareness, and she had the intoxicating sense that she could read her adversaries' thoughts. "Not a stitch," she said. "Everything I own is in my apartment."

The female cop was stuffing the dress, shoes, and raincoat into separate plastic bags. Her partner said, "Your friend Brick has a record, you know."

"I know," Magdalen said, thinking, It's over. I made it. Relief coursed through her. "Speaking of Brick," she added lightly, "what have your buddies done with him?"

"Just asking him a few questions, so he can confirm what you've told us," said the older cop. "Routine stuff."

* * *

"You're sure that was all they asked you?" Magdalen demanded.

"Jeez, I *told* you." Brick heaved his put-upon sigh and repeated: " 'When did she come in? What was she wearing? Did she go out again? Did I go out? What did we do?' They must've run through it sixteen different ways."

Brick was looking a little more lifelike, she decided. When the police had come and taken him away, half an hour after Shelly's phone call, she'd been afraid he might pass out in front of them. "And you told them I came in about four-thirty or five—"

"I already said—"

"—while you were watching that sci-fi movie," she continued, relentless.

"*Beastmaster*, yeah. I told them you got pissed off and wouldn't watch it, that you locked yourself in the john."

Not exactly inspired, but there hadn't been much time for invention. "But we did look at two more movies," she prompted. "Together."

"Yeah. The two Clint Eastwood spaghetti westerns on TNT. And after that we had a frozen pizza and . . ." He reddened, looked away.

"And?"

"We went to bed," he mumbled.

It was one of the oddly pleasing things about him, that unexpected shyness when it came to talking about sex. God knew he had nothing to be shy about in terms of equipment or performance, and if he wasn't an imaginative lover, he was at least totally biddable. He just couldn't—or wouldn't—boast about it afterward. A definite asset in an employee who was screwing his boss.

"Went to bed," she repeated. "And stayed there till this morning."

"That's what I told them," he said. "Listen, Magdalen . . ."

"Shut up," she said. "I've got an errand I want you to run. Two errands."

He brightened immediately. "Sure, Magdalen."

"First, go to my apartment. Bring me the pair of black jeans hanging in the closet, and a sweatshirt—the one with the crocodile on the front—and a pair of socks and my sneakers." She saw his expression: "I'll write it down for you. Then, on the way back here, I want you to pick up the papers. All you can find: *News*, *Post*, *Newsday*—even the *Times*."

"Okay," he said, looking puzzled.

Like reading the notices the morning after opening night, she thought. Only this time I know we've got a hit.

* * *

It seemed an age until Brick, clutching his list, left the tiny studio. She watched from behind the shade as he shambled

down the street, half expecting an unmarked car to follow discreetly in his wake, but she could see no sign of any undue interest in the tall, broad-shouldered figure. How is it, she wondered, that someone so gorgeous can look stupid just walking? And from behind, at that?

As soon as he was out of sight, she went to the narrow, grimy alcove that the management was pleased to call a kitchenette: an antique sink, its porcelain etched green beneath the ever-dripping tap; below it a feeble refrigerator barely large enough for a couple of individual frozen pizzas and two six-packs of beer (its usual contents); and on the counter, where once a two-burner hot plate had squatted and smoldered, a microwave oven, which she opened.

The damp bundle had been wedged in so tightly, filling every inch of space, that it emerged as a wrinkled cube. The cube fell apart in her hands, reverting to a pair of dark slacks, a sweater, and a leather jacket, already beginning to smell moldy.

The damp weight in her hands was like a trigger: suddenly she was shaking all over, almost too weak to stand. All that woman cop had to do was look in the microwave, and it would've been fade to black. Christ, what a crazy chance to take. And then, just as suddenly, the counterreaction—a surging exultation, a realization that she had faced the worst and got through it.

From beneath the Hide-A-Bed she retrieved a plastic bag that contained a pair of limp boots, with a pair of sodden gloves stuffed into one of them. A woman, even a woman cop, should've realized that no female under seventy would wear that hideous dress a second longer than necessary, she thought. Thank God you didn't guess I had a change of clothes with me in D.C. And thank God—or Hecate—that I didn't just ditch the dress in the ladies' room at Washington National.

She jammed the wet clothes into the bag. Cautiously she stuck her head out the door, but the inhabitants of the Law-

rence Residential Hotel were, as usual, represented only by the smells of stale cooking and the barely muffled sounds of radio sermons and TV soaps behind their locked doors.

Magdalen hurried down the dimly lit hall to the incinerator room. Too bad about the jacket—three hundred dollars down the chute. And those slacks, the only pair that's ever really showed off my ass. She opened the chute door and was about to stuff the bag and its contents down the metal tube when she became aware that something was wrong; after a moment's thought she realized what it was: no muted furnace roar from the building's cellar, no uprush of hot air from the chute. The incinerator was off.

Probably they're down there now, she thought. Pawing through last night's ashes. Wouldn't they just love to have this stuff land on their heads? But where could she hide it? She ransacked her memory for a place, sensing the answer that lurked at the edge of her mind. Only when she stopped trying to remember, started back down the hall, did it surface: Of course, she thought. The rat hotel.

Like many old New York rooming houses, the Lawrence had been built with a fireplace in virtually every room and near each fireplace, recessed into some convenient gap in the building's fabric, a storage space for firewood. The fireplace in Brick's studio had long since been torn out, but the wood closet was still there, behind the Hide-A-Bed, its opening covered only by a cleverly arranged flap of wallpaper. Brick had discovered it by accident, from the noise of the rats that inhabited the space. He used it as a place to keep his stash—and the heap of mostly useless military junk he'd stolen when the army had tossed him out on his ear.

As she was pushing the Hide-A-Bed back against the wall, the phone rang. It was Shelly again: "Cops been there yet?"

"They just left," she said. "With my clothes—the ones I was wearing yesterday." And I took them over the jumps, Shelly: it was easy.

"Forensic tests," he was saying. "Whoever killed old Fielding must've rubbed up against him. There'll be traces on the killer's clothes."

"Is that so?" she said. "How'd you find out?"

"I have my methods," he replied, sounding absurdly pleased with himself, then laughed aloud. "Actually, police headquarters is like iceberg night on the *Titanic*. Everybody running around in circles, feds and the NYPD at each other's throats: if you just stand in a corner and listen for thirty seconds, you'll hear it all. And talk about the usual suspects." He chuckled. "They must have dragged in every wino, panhandler, and druggie in Manhattan. Place smells like a zoo."

"A major production, then," said Magdalen.

"Like you wouldn't believe," he agreed. "I guess the city's really getting heat from Washington on this one."

A small, cold stab of apprehension just under her rib cage, but her voice was cool and level. "What really happened, Shelly? Or do they know yet?"

"They've got some hard facts," the lawyer replied. "Whoever did it jumped Fielding from behind. Knocked him down somehow, put their knee between the old guy's shoulder blades, and pulled his chin up and back till his neck snapped. Took his wallet, rolled him into the gutter, and ran."

Took his wallet? Rolled him into the gutter? But those questions were too dangerous. "So it *was* a mugger."

"Maybe. Not a typical MO for a mugger, so they tell me. Too orchestrated . . ." He groped for a better word. "Too efficient, maybe. The smart money says it was somebody who hated Fielding, knew his habits, stalked him like a deer—and ambushed him."

"But it must've been some kind of martial arts guy," she put in. "To break his neck like that."

"That's the front-running theory," Shelly agreed. "Anybody in this town who wants a weapon can find one in five minutes. A person who kills barehanded does it because he wants to."

Just hold on to that thought, boys. And aloud: "Well, good for him, whoever he is. Ding-dong, the witch is dead, and we can live happily ever after."

"Not exactly." Shelly's bantering tone went flat. "That was the other reason I called."

I don't want to hear this. But, "Tell me," she managed at last.

"Wiedle, the subcommittee counsel, called me. They're going for a perjury indictment."

For a moment or two Magdalen's mind refused to absorb his words. Then, as their meaning sank in, she was swept by blinding, uncontrollable rage. She wanted to scream, smash something, hurl the phone at the wall, but in the end she just stood trembling with fury, hearing the tinny voice at the other end of the line calling her name. For nothing, she thought. I took that incredible risk for nothing. Without warning, memory summoned up the almost liquid snap as the old man's neck gave way, the straining body suddenly limp beneath her. Well, at least the old bastard's dead, she thought. That's one favor the world owes me.

Somehow the idea made her feel better. She forced herself to speak, and the voice that emerged, though not her own, was that of sweet reason: "They can't be serious," she said. "The whole thing was Fielding's private vendetta. Because of *Horseplay*."

"More correctly known as *Horseplay in the Capitol Cloakroom*. Don't remind me," Shelly said sourly. "The play with a certain named congressman screwing an actress dressed like a you-know-what on stage. The play you told me you didn't write, only the subcommittee has a working script with your name on the cover, and your handwritten corrections all through it. That was dumb, Magdalen. . . ."

His voice droned on, telling her just how dumb she'd been to lie to a congressional committee and get caught. But she knew all that, accepted it. The only question was what to do about it.

The answer was right in front of her, of course. Had been all along—she'd almost given in yesterday, until she'd seen old Fielding at the airport, trying to pretend he was invisible, with that ridiculous hat and his head pulled down into his collar like some obscene turtle. He was lined up for the flight after hers, and she'd waited at La Guardia on an impulse, followed him out of curiosity. She'd been standing outside the theater in the rain for almost an hour before she'd realized the opportunity fate was presenting her with. It had been so easy, so—why not admit it?—satisfying. Regret it? Not for an instant.

But the mess hadn't gone away. The jackals were still snapping at her heels, or whatever jackals did. Maybe she couldn't handle it alone, after all. But there remained that hidden ace, the card she'd been carrying up her sleeve for nearly eighteen months. Now there was no choice but to play it.

When it finally dawned on Shelly that Magdalen wasn't even listening to his admonitions, he hung up in a huff. She sat as if frozen, barely breathing. Come on, she told herself. Dial it: you know the number. What was stopping her? The familiar hot wave of rage and hate and longing swept over her, with fear close behind.

The memory of the night before tipped the balance: it was what he would've done in the same situation. Slowly, carefully, deliberately, her forefinger picked out the number. As she heard the distant ring, she drew a deep, steadying breath.

4. Diana

VUE POINTE HOTEL, MONTSERRAT; 6:00 P.M. SATURDAY

For Diana Speed, vacations were a precisely calculated process—a series of deliberate disconnects that severed, one by one, the high-tension links to her pressurized New York existence. In the small, pear-shaped Caribbean island of Montserrat, thirty miles from the tourist anthill of Antigua, she had found a setting that made withdrawal almost painless.

The morning newspaper was first to go; *The New York Times* arrived a day late at Antigua and rarely managed the water jump to Montserrat at all. But that one-day lag was what made the paper redundant: the world those headlines were bemoaning was already history.

Then television. Although an intrusive cable system bombarded the island with many of the same programs Diana half watched back in Manhattan, it also provided, mysteriously, satellite feed from a local station in Denver. An extended High Plains weather forecast, viewed from the Caribbean, was so marvelously irrelevant that she had no trouble leaving the TV in her hotel cottage off for the remainder of her stay.

The telephone was more difficult. Diana had banned cellular phones from her life on the grounds that they were hopelessly vulgar, besides encouraging both professional and personal insecurity. But the garden-variety telephone had become too umbilical to sever easily; at last she erased temptation by having the hotel management simply remove the instrument from the cottage before she arrived.

Her work—the stacks of paper connected with her job as treasurer of Wild-Freeman Publishing—could just be left behind, though memoranda and reports seemed to slither into her luggage by some perverse agency of their own. But Diana's more important function, as in-house personal representative of Wild-Freeman's absentee owner, required her to carry a great many corporate secrets in her head, and they were far more difficult to close the door on. Until she remembered a psychological trick she'd learned from her first employer, old Dr. Fasolt of State Department Intelligence, and instructed her mind to build a temporary wall around everything she knew of her employer's affairs. To her surprise, it worked.

Or usually worked. She had begun this vacation with a dark cloud of apprehension on her mental horizon, and it stubbornly refused to dissipate. On the face of things, there was no reason for pessimism. Times were tough in publishing, but Wild-Freeman had never been healthier—fat and deadwood trimmed away, a solidly productive backlist, a dozen promising titles for next season.

Still, something was wrong. It had started with almost indefinable hints: the hallway conference that stopped dead at her approach, the improbable cooperation of people who despised each other. Lately the unseen hand had become a little bolder: just last week, the vital, predeal memo that was delivered just too late to be read with Diana's usual microscopic attention. . . . But there was nothing like hard evidence, just nuances that sounded, when put into words, like galloping paranoia.

For a while Diana had forced herself to ignore her instinct.

Even after two years at Wild-Freeman, she was still an outsider in the world of book publishing—a closed circuit whose addiction to often childish intrigue reminded her of a girls' boarding school. Or Washington, in a minor key. Even without evidence, though, she had a reasonably solid notion of which Wild-Freeman executives were feeling restive and what they wanted.

Not that she could do anything to solve the basic problem, which was the company's lack of a president. When Diana's employer, the billionaire entrepreneur Roger Channing, had acquired Wild-Freeman—as footnote to a vast coup involving a half-dozen larger firms—he had lopped off the existing management and tossed Diana in as de facto CEO. The emptiness of the Wild-Freeman president's office had certainly focused the efforts of the remaining executives, but it was a tactic that, in Diana's opinion, had run its useful course. The strivers were metamorphosing into schemers, which would soon produce the kind of hidden rot that could damage a company beyond repair.

Wild-Freeman needed a president, now. It was a point Diana had made several times to the Rajah, as Channing was known in the corridors of his power. He had heard her out, nodded—and changed the subject. She was used to that, knew Wild-Freeman's owner would move when he pleased, without warning. There was nothing she could do, and for that kind of frustration Diana had an answer. Because she was incapable of just baking in the Caribbean sun, she threw herself into physical activity. A couple of sets of tennis, before the sun rose too high, were followed by a mile-long swim up the coast and back. After lunch she might snorkel out to the reef and annoy a few fish or hike up the trails that wound around the green shoulders of Montserrat's sleeping volcano.

By the time her self-allotted week was over, her rented mountain bike had become a familiar sight along all the island's roads and on a number of tracks normally traversed only by donkeys. Virtually every Montserratian had had at least one

glimpse—usually blurred—of a six-foot-tall, ash-blond female dynamo whizzing past, and a local calypsonian had even been inspired to compose a number entitled "Nonstop Lady" (though at the last moment he flinched from performing it in Diana's presence).

The final afternoon of her vacation, she returned from her ride—a full circuit of the island's perimeter road—with a satisfying sense of fatigue and two hours to spare before dinner. Tomorrow's trip back to the maelstrom was going to be an extended bore, made even more depressing by airline food. Tonight, therefore, she would treat herself to an all-out dinner at the island's best restaurant.

After an extended shower—mindless relaxation under the sensuous prickle of hot water, savoring the delicious odor of coconut soap on her skin—she slipped into the Armani jumpsuit she favored for solo dining in the tropics. A quick appraisal in the mirror went some way to lifting her spirits. The jumpsuit, besides being comfortable, made the most of her slender, long-legged figure yet wasn't obvious about it, while the wide black belt emphasized her narrow waist and gave just enough curve to her hips to make them demand a second look. Her blue-gray eyes looked a couple of shades lighter than usual thanks to her tan, and her short hair had bleached a little closer to true blond. Her lips (which might, she always felt, have been just a soupçon fuller) felt dry from all the salt water, but at least the skin hadn't cracked. And though her high-bridged nose had taken more sun than it needed, her fair skin recovered quickly, and by tomorrow the red would have faded.

On balance, not bad, she decided. To her own unforgiving eye she looked younger than when the Rajah had rescued her. three years before, from the serfdom of temping for a gang of lawyers. And a whole lot better than she'd looked the year before that, at the aching, draggletail end of her marriage to the Hon. Willard Upfield (R.-Conn.)—Congressman Profile to his staff and the Golden Gelding to the Washington press corps.

Things were running her way now, Diana reminded herself. She had an apartment that was just about perfect and money in the bank. Her assignment—cajoling (sometimes bullying) an old-line book publisher into the modern world—engaged her interest as well as her skill. Whatever crisis might be shaping at Wild-Freeman, she could handle it. As one of Roger Channing's select band of troubleshooters, she would never have to scrabble for a job again.

True, her personal life was nearly nonexistent now that Alan Troubridge was out of it, and his departure still kicked up surprisingly painful memories. Sometimes she would hear behind her a familiar, sardonic Brit accent and, when she spun around, heart lifting, see only strangers; the night before last she had come abruptly awake, sure he was there beside her, only to find the big double bed empty as usual. The stab of loneliness had almost taken her breath away.

Maybe that kind of pain was the price you had to pay for keeping your spirit free. The Rajah might command her time, but nobody owned her soul, least of all a certain double-crossing Limey. She struck a last, defiant pose in front of the mirror. Come to think of it, she didn't look that different from a dozen years ago, when she'd arrived in Washington fresh out of Wellesley, to sit at Dr. Fasolt's feet and learn the way of the underground world. "You are like a young falcon," Dr. Fasolt had told her in his pedantic, slightly accented wheeze. "I shall teach you how to hunt."

Troubridge, she suddenly recalled, had said somewhat the same thing. It was last year, the memorable night they'd gone to the Met to hear Von Stade sing Cherubino. (In the cab afterward Diana had found herself caroling "Voi, che sapete," to Troubridge's unconcealed amusement.) Later, when they were making love, he'd suddenly paused.

"What is it?" she'd gasped. "For Christ's sake, Troubridge, don't *do* that to me."

He was breathing hard, the sweat running down his bony, intelligent face. "Sorry," he panted. "I finally realized what

you remind me of, Speed. One of the lesser raptors—a tiercel, I think."

As abruptly as he'd stopped he began again, driving the breath out of her. Before she could think of a suitable reply she was over the precipice, with him an instant behind her, and it didn't matter.

Now Troubridge was gone, home to England and out of her life; Dr. Fasolt was dead, she'd heard; and the carefully balanced structure of her career was being menaced by her own colleagues. The cloud of depression thickened abruptly, but she refused to give in to it without a fight. And the best defense against the blues, in her experience, was food, in quantities (thanks to a hyperactive metabolism) that would have made a fullback blanch.

As she applied the lightest dusting of blush to her cheeks, she weighed the merits of chicken breast in cream-and-shallot sauce against the Belham Valley Restaurant's specialty, frog's legs (AKA "Montserrat mountain chicken") sautéed in garlic. The latter, she decided at last. With conch fritters to start and a bottle of pinot grigio, if it was available. For dessert . . .

The knock on her cottage's door made her jump. And when she saw the hotel's handyman on her doorstep, she was completely taken aback. Then she saw what he was holding, and her heart sank.

It must have showed in her face. "Sorry, Miss Speed," the man said. "Desk, they told me to bring it. Say you got a very important call, can't wait."

A very important call from someone who could override a valued guest's express orders, she thought. Only one person that could be. "Put it here, please," she said. Her voice sounded toneless and dead in her ears.

The handyman, his chore accomplished, vanished without a backward look. Diana took a deep breath and picked up the handset, which was giving off the hiss and crackle of an overseas connection. "Diana Speed," she said.

"I apologize for interrupting your vacation." The familiar basso rumble sounded different, but for a moment she couldn't pinpoint why. "I need to see you as soon as you return."

Worried, she decided. And boy, does that make me worried times six. Something else there, too. "My plane gets into Kennedy tomorrow afternoon at two," she replied. "American 648 from San Juan."

"Yes. Jamie will meet you." Now that was odd: Jamie, a monosyllabic ex–grand prix driver, was the Rajah's personal bodyguard as well as his chauffeur. It was an article of office faith that Jamie was never more than fifty yards from his master, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year.

"I'll be looking for him," she said, wanting desperately to ask what was going on and knowing it would be a waste of breath. Or worse: an advertisement of her apprehension.

"Don't eat on the plane," he said. "I'll take you to Barbetta for a late lunch."

The tight feeling just behind her eyes—the not quite ache she hadn't felt for the last three days—snapped back into place. Maybe there's nothing really wrong, she told herself. Maybe he's just lonely. But that was a scarier idea than any emergency she could think of. Anyway, the Rajah almost never lunched with the help, and when he did it was usually the guest's last meal as a Channing employee.

"I appreciate this, Diana," he was saying. "I need . . ."

Appreciate? Her head was whirling. Need? In three years as one of Roger Channing's corps d'elite Diana had never heard him speak like this. Come to think of it, she could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he'd called her by her first name. "Of course," she heard herself say.

Perhaps he sensed her confusion. His tone, which she might have termed importunate in anyone else, cooled abruptly. "Till tomorrow, then." And he was gone, leaving her with a sense that she had somehow failed him.

Another knock. Diana moved toward the door, realized she was still holding the phone. "Come in," she called.

The young receptionist put her head into the room. "Your cab's here, Miss Speed." And, seeing her blank look, added, "For the Belham Valley? The restaurant."

"I'm not going," said Diana. "I've changed my mind." Appalled at her peremptory tone, she tried again. "Here"—she fumbled a ten from her purse—"give him this, would you? And could you cancel the reservation?"

"Sure," said the girl. She paused. "You all right, Miss Speed? You want I should send dinner to your room?"

Diana managed to bite back an automatic "God, no!" Forcing a parody of her usual smile, she said, "Thanks, Marlenia. That's sweet of you. But I just don't feel like eating tonight."

If Troubridge had heard that, he'd be sending for the surgeons, she thought. My God, I miss him.

5. Magdalen

OUTSIDE WILD-FREEMAN; SATURDAY EVENING

Whatever the performance medium, Magdalen thought, shifting from one nearly numb foot to the other, opening nights were always the same. You woke that morning with the sensation of a small, solid object—no bigger than a lipstick, say—lodged just under your rib cage. All day long it grew larger and heavier until just before the curtain, when it felt as if you'd swallowed an old-fashioned sash weight. And then suddenly, just when you were sure this time you'd disgrace yourself and throw up all over the prompt book, it was gone—replaced (if you were lucky) by the incredible feeling of absolute dominance that made all the suffering worthwhile.

It'd been different with that old bastard Fielding. Until she saw him come sidling out of the porno theater, she hadn't really made up her mind—at least, she hadn't allowed herself to realize what she'd decided to do. Even when she stepped out of the shadows toward him, the final decision was hanging in the air. And then their eyes met: Magdalen could see he knew what was going to happen, knew before she herself had

formed the thought completely. After that, the outcome was so quick, there was no time for her to be afraid.

But not today. Today she was stiff with terror. Barely able to speak, much less summon up the eloquence she was going to need. Only the deep, smoldering anger she had nursed inside her for all these years sustained her will.

Across the street, a car pulled up at the freight entrance of the office building on the corner of Fifth Avenue, and Magdalen felt her heartbeat pick up speed. It wasn't the same car—or even the same make—as the ones she'd seen the other times she'd stationed herself here, but it had the same kind of stolid, four-door anonymity, and the three men who got out, though different from each other in size and dress, were also versions of the same basic model. A similar sedan, she knew, would just have arrived around the corner on Fifth Avenue and disgorged three similar men.

Maybe, she thought, if you had his resources, you could just send away for them. There was probably a catalog: *Our best bodyguard*, it might read. *Assorted sizes. Includes hat, coat, too sharp suit. Firearm extra. (Shipped UPS collect, set of three in convenient reusable sedan.)*

The car pulled away, leaving the three men standing in a clump by the curb. The thin weekend stream of pedestrians parted to flow around them as they surveyed the street with the air of having done this many times before. One of them—as she knew he would—spotted Magdalen huddling in a recess of the Japanese bank's facade opposite. He said something that made the other two laugh, then started across the street toward her.

She pretended not to see him, pulled the ripped cardboard carton more tightly around her knees, and drew her head down into the ratty fur collar of her stained coat. So far, everything was running exactly to script, but the lump in her gut was still there, and her mouth was as dry as La Cumbre Peak in August.

"You here again, sweetheart?" he said as he came toward her.

She was sure she'd never seen him before and guessed she must have become part of the bodyguards' regular briefing. So much the better. "Hello, honey. Goin' out?" In Magdalen's ear her own voice was perfect: hoarse and horribly eager.

The man—young and not bad looking, in a beefy way—tried to cover his instinctive flinch with a smile. "Not today, thanks."

"Come on, honey," she said, adding a whiny overlay. "Right here with me. Got my own room—see?" She held up the remains of the cardboard box.

His forced smile went stiff. "Look, sweetheart, you're going to have to move."

He's coming back, then, she thought, feeling the adrenaline jolt, stronger and more compelling than any drug she'd ever tried. "Ain't gonna move," she whined. "This is my place—only place I got."

"Just for a while," he said, and glanced over his shoulder to his watching comrades. One of them pointedly shot his cuff and tapped his heavy gold wristwatch. "You got to move now," said the young man. "Right this minute."

"Won't," said Magdalen, crossing her arms over her breasts. She watched him narrowly: last time, two weeks before, the bodyguard—an older man—hadn't bothered with argument; he'd just slapped her across the face, bloodying her nose.

This one was younger, with fewer layers of callus. "Here," he said. "Go buy yourself a flop someplace."

She snatched the bill—a twenty—from his hand and looked him in the eye, widening her own dramatically. "A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap," she said, crackling. "And munched, and munched, and munched."

"Sure, sure," said the guard. He reached out to take her sleeve, thought better of it.

"Aroint thee, rump-fed ronyon!" Magdalen shrieked. She

stepped cautiously away from the building, forcing herself to move with the clumsy stiffness she had seen in street people.

"So long, sweetheart," the guard said, relief evident in his voice. "Have a great night."

From your mouth to God's ear, sonny boy. The curtain was up. The lump was gone. She could do anything.

* * *

As a fatherless child in Southern California, Magdalen had early assumed that her parents were divorced—the number of single mothers in the neighborhood made the deduction inevitable, and her own mother never corrected it. Magdalen tried to wheedle information about her absent parent from her mother, but with total lack of success. Alys Tyrrell might be loose tongued about her hardscrabble Piedmont upbringing, her short career in low-budget horse operas, or any other subject that flitted through her head, but she was a sphinx when it came to the man who had fathered her only child. "We don't want to talk about that, dear," she would murmur, sweetly stubborn. "Least said, soonest forgotten."

In the the absence of even a weekend father, Magdalen invented the man he would be: Strong. Brilliant. Powerful—in every way the direct opposite of her mother (whom Magdalen, even as a child, thought of as Poor Alys). And although her father had turned his back on pregnant Alys, he would (Magdalen knew) be captivated, enslaved, by the daughter who was, without any possibility of doubt, so very like himself.

At the age of sixteen, while filling out the forms for her first driver's license, Magdalen finally learned the circumstances of her own birth. In the tattered manila envelope where Alys kept the few important documents she hadn't lost or inadvertently destroyed was a certificate issued by the state of Arizona for the birth, in a place called Bullhead City, of one Mary Magdalen Tolliver. The mother's name was Alice Tolliver, the father's was Roger, also Tolliver.

After a few moments' thought Magdalen realized what she was looking at: she already knew her mother's pre-Hollywood name had been Taliaferro, which she pronounced Tolliver, in the Virginia fashion. Under direct examination, Alys confirmed that she had changed her name (at her hard-shell Baptist family's insistence) from Taliaferro to Tolliver when she went into sinful show business. A year later it was changed again, this time by a mysterious functionary at the studio, who had divined that "Alys Tyrrell" was the *nom juste* for the latest pretender to Maureen O'Hara's saddle.

But, Alys insisted (a little too firmly?), there was no "Roger Tolliver"—she had invented him herself, spurred by necessity.

At the time, Magdalen was too furious and disappointed even to ask how she'd happened to be born in a town named Bullhead City. Later she discovered it had been nearly pure accident and entirely pure Alys: terminally pregnant, when her labor pains began she was driving alone from Beverly Hills to the disreputable Las Vegas hospital where the studio had arranged for her to bear her child of shame (under her own name, of course). She had got lost at the California-Nevada line and wound up, with scarcely minutes to spare, in a fishermen's motel on the shores of the Colorado River, a hundred miles from her destination.

Once Alys's connection with Republic Pictures was completely severed, she moved with the baby Mary Magdalen to the then sleepy seaside city of Santa Barbara and settled down to do good works and live off the rental income from half a dozen cottages on the west side of town, which her real estate agent kept jammed to the rafters with the local underclass—feckless surfers living on remittances from their parents back east, illegal Mexicans and their extended families, and, later, permanent UCSB graduate students dodging the Vietnam draft.

Alys had also decided that a connection with the silver screen, however brief and ingloriously ended, was worth preserving, which was why she had become Tyrrell again. In the

California of the 1960s, after all, what you called yourself was only—and properly, in Alys's view—a reflection of your current self-image; a legally valid new persona required only that you file a paper stating you weren't changing your name as part of a criminal enterprise. The same casual procedure had covered Alys's infant daughter, whose original first name had vanished between the bureaucratic cracks.

A decade and a half later, however, the California Department of Motor Vehicles was no longer quite so relaxed. Magdalen could hit California's highways immediately as Mary Magdalen Tolliver, or she could have her name changed legally and come back with the requisite certificate, at which time she could (as the clerk remarked, with the old-world courtesy so typical of DMVs everywhere) get a license as Minnie Mouse, for all he cared.

The prospect of an endless future as Mary M. Tolliver enraged Magdalen. She stormed back to Alys and ordered her to straighten out the mess she'd made. For once in her foggy life, Alys did just that, with the connivance of a slightly shady minister (later defrocked) who provided a backdated baptismal certificate for Magdalen Tyrrell, daughter of Alys Tyrrell and a father to be announced.

Until the episode of the driver's license, Magdalen had not given much thought to her circumstances. Confronted suddenly with an official document that said she was, in effect, somebody else, she for the first time took a long, careful look at her habitat. (She also tucked away the birth certificate of Mary Magdalen Tolliver: like an extra toe, it still belonged to her, however unpleasant its associations.)

As she sat cross-legged on her bed, staring at her brand-new driver's license, she found herself pondering how a bird-brain like Alys, excommunicated by her family and dismissed by her employer, had acquired enough money to buy her small, well-appointed home on the fashionable strip of hillside that Santa Barbarans called the Riviera—not to mention six highly profitable west side shacks. True, Alys worked like a beaver,

but always as a volunteer, for local charities that were a collective blur to Magdalen.

That night at dinner, Alys found herself assailed with a barrage of carefully prepared questions. Step by tearful step she retreated before her daughter's coldly determined third degree. Backed into a corner, Alys finally declared that the two of them were beneficiaries of a legacy from a midwestern distant cousin, left for Magdalen in a trust whose income went to Alys while she lived. She'd meant to tell her daughter about it on Magdalen's twenty-first birthday. To prove her contention, she produced from a cardboard box in the garage a vast heap of correspondence, no two items in chronological order and many partly eaten by fieldmice.

Magdalen scanned the papers and quickly decided that the testator, Cousin Luther Hawkins, was too ephemeral to take seriously. There were no letters from him, no photographs, not even an obituary. (Besides, Alys couldn't even remember whether he had lived in Dubuque or Des Moines.) Cousin Luther's only concrete manifestation was the trust itself, administered by a Santa Barbara law firm, acting on behalf of a similar firm in New York.

Why New York? Magdalen demanded after a silence of several minutes. Why not Iowa? Was Luther Hawkins my father? At which Alys went into hysterics and fled to her room, locking the door behind her.

The next morning Magdalen dressed with unusual care, put on rather too much makeup, and drove her new secondhand Mustang not to Santa Barbara High School, but to the State Street offices of McCorkle, Arblaster, and Cruz, where she asked to see Mr. Wingfield Arblaster, the firm's senior living partner, whose signature appeared most frequently on Alys's papers dealing with the Hawkins Trust.

* * *

A year afterward, looking back, Magdalen wondered how she had first appeared to the tall, silver-haired attorney who

presently came out to greet her. As it happened, she didn't have to wonder long—just the half second required to roll over in Wingfield Arblaster's four-poster bed and ask him.

He had set down the wineglass he was holding before he'd answered. "To tell you the truth, my dear: sweaty," he'd said, chuckling at the recollection. "Cute, for sure, but sweaty. You were dripping."

"That's not very nice," she'd replied. "If you felt that way, how come you seduced me?"

"I happen to have a weakness for slightly overweight, passionate young girls with red hair," he'd said. "And a lot of them sweat. Anyway," he'd added, "*you* seduced *me*. You thought you could make me tell you who your father was."

He was right: he'd read her perfectly (except for the passionate part). But he never told her, even if he knew. That last, well-guarded secret had literally dropped into Magdalen's lap twelve years later, when she was settling her mother's estate.

As Magdalen waddled away from the Wild-Freeman offices, her steps constricted by the several layers of clothing she wore, she felt in the ragged pocket of her coat for the envelope that contained the two yellowed clippings—or copies of them, the original newsprint having crumbled to dust soon after they fell from between the pages of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, which for Alys served many of the same purposes as a family Bible.

They were items carefully scissored from gossip columns, tiny tidbits of flackery with the proper names in boldface. (Judging by the type and the prose, Magdalen guessed it was same column on different days, but there was no indication of source or date.)

The first story noted that **Budding Starlet Alys Tyrrell** had been seen noshing intimately at the Bel-Air with **Baby Tycoon Roger Channing**; in the second scrap, the Budding Starlet and the Baby Tycoon were adjacent names in a long list of attendees at one of several post-Oscar bashes thrown for Mike Todd's superfilm, *Around the World in 80 Days*.

The minute she first saw the two scraps of paper, Magdalen, whose mind was not entirely numbed by grief, knew they were uniquely important: not only had Alys considered the writings of Richard Bach divinely inspired, but all her other clippings were contained in a fancy leatherbound folder, with the source and date of each carefully inscribed. All her life Alys had clipped and filed every public mention of her own name, down to the boilerplate rosters of attendees at Santa Barbara charity dinners. It was inconceivable that she would have forgotten two such juicy items.

The next step was easy. A quick check in the library gave her the year *Around the World in 80 Days* had swept the Oscars. It was, as Magdalen had expected, 1956—the year before her own birth. And she knew (who in the world did not?) that the Baby Tycoon had since become one of the masters of the universe, a man whom dictators and presidents went to on bended knee. Two small, sourceless clippings and Alys's Freudian slip on her daughter's birth certificate weren't proof by even the loosest definition, but they were enough for Magdalen, enough to start her on a search for Roger Channing.

But the trail dried up—or, rather, it didn't seem to exist. Though Roger Channing's name appeared everywhere, from checkout-counter tabloids to stratospheric financial newsletters, the man himself was almost as well hidden as Cousin Luther Hawkins. He owned, it was said, an immense yacht and a private railroad car, but if he had a stationary residence, no one knew its address. He owned dozens of companies, small and (mostly) large, but worked at none of them. He appeared in public so rarely that he could be confident of going unidentified.

There was one stock photo of him that every paper did seem to have on file; it dated from the day, about six years before, when he had made a very brief appearance before a federal commission—the FCC or FTC or some other bureaucratic coven that began, appropriately, with F. In the photo Roger Channing looked like a lion who had just discovered something

rotten under his nose. (The uncropped version of the scene explained his expression: a government lawyer was waving a sheaf of papers about a foot in front of his face.)

A year later some terrorists had tried and failed to kidnap Channing, and a daring paparazzo had got a shot of the reclusive billionaire standing beside his car—a very ordinary car to Magdalen's eye—and looking pensively at his attackers' bodies in a blood-spattered row at his feet, like hunting trophies.

But search as she might, that was as close as she got until just last year. (The yearning, burning desires of her childhood had gone sour, were as bitter as bile now. Unless, as she sometimes managed to believe, he didn't even know Alys had borne his child.) Then a brief item in *The New York Times* noted Roger Channing's acquisition of Wild-Freeman, a smallish New York book publisher, along with several much larger companies, in a hostile takeover. One of Magdalen's employees at Hecate Ltd. had a friend in the world of books, who had a friend who knew someone at Wild-Freeman, and that tertiary source allowed that while she herself had never set eyes on the new boss of bosses, there was an unoccupied office on the seventeenth floor that he was said to visit, for purposes unknown, on Saturdays.

The source had found this out when she went to the office late one Saturday, to retrieve something she'd left behind Friday afternoon. "The place was like a fort," she'd told Magdalen. "Big guys in lumpy suits standing around in the lobby. Nobody but the cleaning crew allowed upstairs. It was a scary scene."

It was also a recurrent scene—not every Saturday, but once or twice a month. The first few times Magdalen had watched from across Fifth Avenue, one figure lost among the pre-Christmas crowds. The pattern remained essentially the same: about midmorning a nondescript car came down the avenue and drew up in front of the building, and a second came west along the side street and let off its heavy-shouldered passengers

at the freight entrance. Five or perhaps ten minutes later two more sedans pulled up, sometimes at the side door, sometimes on the avenue, and a tall, burly figure emerged—sometimes from the first car, sometimes from the second—and hurried inside, flanked by two more of the interchangeable guard. When he left, whether for lunch or for the day, the same ceremony occurred in reverse.

It was easy, if expensive, to get the number of the direct phone line to the office the Rajah used. And then when she had the number, Magdalen couldn't bring herself to call. *He'll just hang up on you*, an inner voice told her. *Some nutball chickie he's never heard of—you won't get one sentence out before he's off the line.*

But having got this close, she couldn't break free. In helpless orbit, she went back to watching his arrivals and departures. After the holidays, when the Fifth Avenue crowds thinned out, Magdalen realized that sooner or later she was bound to be spotted. Yet she was determined to continue—even, if possible, to get closer for a second or two to the man who had become her life's obsession. That problem, at least, was easy to solve: if she couldn't manage to stay out of the guards' sight, she would thrust herself in their faces, but in a guise that would seem to them quite natural. With the number of scruffy homeless living on the Manhattan streets, who would notice one more—and who would investigate too closely a woman who smelled like a garbage pit and behaved like a borderline looney?

His bodyguards accepted her immediately as a genuine, if overfragrant, part of the scenery. But occasional glimpses of that heavy leonine face only tantalized Magdalen to the edge of despair. Sooner or later she would have to beard him alone, make the claim on his affections that would bring her into the kingdom that was rightly hers.

She now realized that whoever had organized the guard at Wild-Freeman considered Channing's arrival and departure the

moments of greatest danger. A quick walk-by revealed that all or most of the attendants remained in the lobby once their leader had ascended, presumably to the Wild-Freeman offices.

What she had to do, then, was get upstairs to those offices somehow, either before or after he came. The answer, when she finally saw it, had been right in front of her for some time: The exact times of the Rajah's appearances were unpredictable, but he always arrived before six P.M., when the evening cleaning crew, half a dozen bulky, middle-aged women, drifted into the lobby one or two at a time. They wore long, scruffy coats over gray coveralls and scarves or babushkas on their heads. Once all of them were assembled, the night elevator starter took them up in a body, their arrival signaled to the street below by a sudden illumination on the three Wild-Freeman floors.

Magdalen happened to be between engagements at this point. Hecate's previous production, a savage performance piece that featured Brick, two naked women smeared with brown paste, and a couple of pounds of vegetable accessories, had repelled even the company's regular customers, and *Horseplay* was still having casting problems.

So Magdalen had nearly two weeks to study the cleaners, following first one and then another as she left the office building, tracking them to all-night coffee shops and then to the subway that carried them back to wherever they came from. Next she spent hours before the mirror—perfecting the women's walk, the way they carried themselves, their gestures—and then made an excursion to the open-air clothing bins of Canal Street, where she found those elements of her costume that hadn't turned up in the Greenwich Village trash cans.

Only after several months did she allow herself to realize that the elaborate preparation had become an end in itself, a way of postponing the one crucial moment that was more and more unnerving the longer she waited. Her encounter with

Fielding had been the catalyst she needed to get her moving. But her overwhelming need had betrayed her into a false step.

I should've just gone to him. I knew that goddamn call was a mistake, even while I was dialing. He'd answered on the first ring, a deep, slightly hoarse rumble that was somehow exactly what she'd expected to hear.

To his monosyllabic "Yes?" she'd replied—idiotically—"It's me. Magdalen."

His silence led her on. "Your daughter," she managed. "Alys Tyrrell was my mother." She was still forming the next sentence when he spoke again.

Cold, hateful, rejecting words. She couldn't—wouldn't—bring them back into memory. But one thing was clear: he knew exactly who and what Magdalen Tyrrell was. And he despised her.

Completely shattered, she wanted only to hide, at least until the worst of the hurt had faded. And then the anger, which had always been there, a fire down below in her soul, broke its way into her consciousness. He couldn't cast her aside like this. She wouldn't let him. Whatever she had become was in some way his doing, and he would be forced to pay for it. Never had she needed her patrimony more urgently—and she would get it from him one way or another.

* * *

Once her heart was steeled, the rest was almost too easy. She scuttled away from her observation post, west to the Avenue of the Americas and south a block, where she dodged down into the BMT. The subway platform was filled with people, but most of them were New Yorkers: when Magdalen turned her back on them and peeled off her bag lady disguise, they simply looked right past her. (The one suburban child who squeaked, "Mommy, that woman's *undressing*," was quickly shaken into silence by its parent.)

Magdalen shed the odorous, ragged coat and, under it, the

vile housedress buttoned to her neck. She stood revealed in a second, shorter coat, well-worn but clean enough, and below it a filthy pair of sweatpants, formerly Brick's.

A single, ferocious glare cleared for her a space on a nearby bench, where she sat in order to pull off the sweatpants, then roll down the cuffs of the gray coverall under it. A train roared into the station at that moment, and the waiting crowd surged aboard. Just as the doors began to close, Magdalen ripped off the dreadful wig she was wearing, balled it up with the discarded coat, sweatpants, and housedress, and tossed the lot into a car bound for uttermost Brooklyn.

She had the feeling that a lingering hint of eau de bag lady hung about her, but she had prepared for that: in her coat pocket was a miniature squirt bottle of her regular perfume, which she applied to her throat and behind her ears. She took from a side pocket a neatly folded scarf and tied it over her head, spat into her hand the set of Halloween novelty teeth that had concealed her own, and started back up the stairway to the street. Minutes later she entered the Wild-Freeman building with two other members of the night crew—just another square, dumpy, vaguely Eastern European female in gray coveralls. The heavies near the doors on the ground floor never gave her a second glance, and the elevator starter, looking right through her, gave her ass a vague swipe as she went past, just as he did to the real cleaners, and Magdalen ignored it, just as they did.

The other coveralled women in the freight elevator paid her almost as little attention. From their dull, unfocused stares Magdalen guessed they were already exhausted as they started their second or third job of the day. One managed a smile and a greeting in a language Magdalen didn't recognize. She returned a *"guten abend,"* figuring—correctly—that German was not going to start a conversation in this group.

The starter, looking bored, got on and drove the car up to fifteen, where everybody debarked—and Magdalen, being last, received a second squeeze. She ignored it again and stepped

out into a darkened reception area, letting her face sag into openmouthed simplicity as the woman who was obviously the leader began to address her troops, one by one.

Her words were presumably instructions but might just as easily have been a recipe for goulash. When Magdalen's turn came, she nodded submissively, muttering, *"ja, ja,"* and not meeting the other woman's eyes. It seemed to work. Moments later, as the group split up, she slipped through a door labeled DESIGN and found herself in a big, open room filled mostly with oversize computer screens and angled drawing tables. On one of them a hand-lettered sign read "No vacuum, por favor."

Hearing voices behind her, Magdalen scuttled on through, trying to make herself walk as if she'd spent her life bent over a dustpan.

An empty hallway and then, thank God, a metal staircase leading up. At sixteen there was a chain across the stairs and another sign: KEEP OUT. Magdalen ducked under and took the next flight two steps at a time, feeling the padding under her coveralls shifting dangerously. As she got to the top, her breathing sounded in her own ears like a steam engine, and the sweat was streaming down her face. Oh, God, she thought, not this time, too. Not in front of him.

She looked out cautiously, half expecting another of the hard-faced men who had dotted the lobby; but the big, dim room was empty. Quickly she performed one last striptease. She pulled off the coat and coverall, yanked away the padding beneath it. Her lightweight slacks and blouse weren't exactly what the well-dressed businesswoman was wearing this season, but they were designed to look rumpled, so the real rumples didn't show too badly. After kicking off her sneakers, she took a pair of shoes from her pocket and tugged them on.

In another pocket was a plastic Ziploc bag. From it she extracted a smaller bag that held a damp cloth and wiped off most of her gray, lined complexion. There was, alas, nothing to be done about her hair but run a comb through it. More as a morale booster than from any perceived need, she fired a

last squirt of perfume down the open neck of her blouse. At last she took three deep breaths and, before she could reconsider, strode to the nearest office and flung open the door.

Or would have flung it open, had it not been locked. The breath went out of her lungs in a rush. Now she saw the small, chaste brass plate that read DIANA SPEED.

Staring about her, she became aware of a voice. A deep, rumbling bass that was coming from the next office down. That must be the one. A good deal of her courage, she found, had somehow leaked out of her, but she could not go back now.

Three more breaths built up her nerve, but it required an almost physical push to get her frozen legs moving. Without knowing how she'd got there, she was standing with the cold doorknob in her hand. The deep voice was much louder, and the door seemed almost to vibrate with the force of it. "I already know the place is breaking up," it was saying. "You tell them they have to hold it together for another week."

The knob seemed to turn by itself, and the door swung open. The huge head lifted, and the strangely familiar face was registering annoyance that slowly, slowly turned to astonished recognition.

"Hello, Father," she said.

6. Bernie

WILD-FREEMAN PUBLISHING, 551 FIFTH AVENUE; 9:00 P.M. SATURDAY

Only the freight elevator was working, a bare steel cage that carried, oddly, a hint of perfume among its orthodox smells of dust, sweat, and commercial-strength disinfectant. The weekend starter, wearing an old sweater instead of his uniform jacket, drove it with a panache that overshot the seventeenth floor by nearly a foot. After two corrections the car was still six inches below the sill, and Bernie Plunkett said, "That's all right. I can walk from here."

The starter, not sure whether to be offended, opened the metal gate with a clash. "You got to call on the house phone when you want to leave," he reminded his passenger.

"Thank you," said Bernie, stepping up and out. He found himself at the center of a large, dimly lit, low-ceilinged space nearly filled with shoulder-high, glass-walled cubicles. Only the central stalk of elevator shafts and washrooms at his back and a quartet of private offices, one in each corner, broke up

the shadowy, deserted vista. A breath of the same perfume he'd noticed in the elevator seemed to hang in the still air.

A more independent person, Bernie supposed, would have been outraged at the Rajah's summons: Drop everything, come running, don't ask why. Bernie accepted it—that was Roger Channing's style, and with his billions he could afford to indulge himself. More important, from Bernie's point of view, was the prospect of action. You never knew what might be coming down when the Rajah called, but you could be sure it wouldn't be penny-ante stuff.

Penny-ante would have been a generous description of Bernie Plunkett's life, pre-Rajah. He'd started out full of illusions—turned down two good offers right after law school in favor of righting the world's wrongs in the Queens County Public Defender's Office. What he hadn't bargained for was that most of his clients would be guilty as hell, and sleazy bores in the bargain. He could keep telling himself that even they deserved legal representation, but in his heart he soon realized that most of them should be stuffed in sacks and dropped in the East River.

A lonely, shy bachelor of thirty-five, Bernie had been glooming at life's crossroads—one sign read POLITICS, the other REAL ESTATE; he loathed both—when he was sucked into the Rajah's orbit. The catalytic situation was so subtle and complex that it was almost invisible, and Bernie's client was barely tangential to it, anyway. Only a blinding stroke of insight enabled the young lawyer to see why an envelope filled with South American bonds that his client claimed to have found in a taxi might be more important than it looked. How much more important wasn't clear until months later, when a seemingly healthy government abruptly dissolved in bankuptcy and gunfire—but by then Bernard Plunkett, Esq., was employed, without formal portfolio, as one of Roger Channing's small corps of personal troubleshooters.

That was two decades ago. In those years Bernie had become the closest thing to a confidant that the Rajah allowed himself.

He had experienced moments of triumph that were very close to ecstasy and moments of terror that still woke him, heart pounding, just before dawn; more important, he knew he was valued, and by a man he idolized.

When the Rajah had called, less than an hour before, Bernie was engaged in his usual Saturday afternoon pursuit—watching young, bronzed, muscular bodies hurtling across his TV screen—and he had forgotten to ask precisely which office at Wild-Freeman Publishing his employer was using. Though Bernie had helped negotiate, two years before, the purchase of the conglomerate that included among its more fragile assets a small Manhattan book publishing firm, he had never visited Wild-Freeman's headquarters; it was, after all, only one among the Rajah's hundred enterprises, with no functional links to the rest of the empire.

Bernie looked around him. If I were the Rajah, he asked himself, where would I be? The nearest of the four corner offices had a door of some reddish wood, finished to a high polish. It looked opulently promising, but even from twenty feet away he could read the ornate lettering on the gleaming brass plate: MR. THOMAS, and beneath it, only slightly smaller, *Vice President and Director of Sales*.

The office in the opposite corner was larger and the sign far smaller; all it said was DIANA SPEED. He recognized the name: Wild-Freeman's treasurer, the Rajah's personal representative on the premises.

I like your style, Diana Speed, Bernie thought. But you're not the one I want.

The third office had no name on the door at all, only a pair of screw holes in the wood a little below eye height. He almost passed it by, until he saw the narrow bar of light under the door. He knocked and at the deep growl—"Come in, Bernie"—felt the familiar twinge of anticipation.

Dusty curtains were drawn across the windows, and the faded wallpaper showed brighter rectangles where pictures had hung. The furnishing theme seemed to be janitorial overstock:

a gray steel desk with a much used swivel chair behind it and two puny, not-quite-matched, armless chairs in front. Bernie assumed the effect was deliberate, a typical Rajah backspin calculated to unsettle those of his visitors who assumed that a man of such eminence would necessarily inhabit a Great Dictator office, full of self-important accoutrements.

Not that furniture or the lack of it made much difference to a room with Roger Channing in it. He was standing by the windows, peering between the curtains, and turned as his employee entered, fixing him with those watchful, yellow-pupiled eyes.

The single word *lion* formed in Bernie's mind, as it always did when he saw the Rajah. And if you were to take a full-grown example of *felis leo*, wrap him in a custom-tailored tweed suit, cram his back paws into $300 Gucci loafers, and knot about his massive throat a dark-blue-and-red stripe, you would have, if not the Rajah's twin, at least his younger brother.

"Thank you for coming, Bernie. I hope I haven't upset any plans."

Bernie's attention, already focused, sharpened another notch. The Rajah never bothered with superfluous thanks, and Bernie was paid—extravagantly, in his own eyes—to be available on just such short notice.

"No problem," he said. "I wasn't doing anything." Something's gone off the rails, he thought. He ran a quick mental scan of the projects he was responsible for, but none of them was unusually problematic—except, perhaps, the Cuban deal, being manipulated at arm's length through a Cayman Islands bank via a Hungarian middleman.

The Rajah cleared his throat, producing a sound remarkably like a lion's hoarse, warning cough. He's decided what he wants to say, Bernie thought. Why can't he spit it out? "You were at the hearing yesterday," the Rajah said at last. "In D.C."

"Yes," said Bernie. He thinks I should know what's bothering him. But I told him Fielding was going to rough her

up, that it'd be worse than the first time. "I'll have the report for you Monday. Unless you'd like me to give you a quick verbal now."

Comprehension lit the Rajah's broad features. "You haven't heard." He took two long strides to the desk, picked up a folded *Daily News*, and extended it so Bernie could see the huge black headline:

"DAWG"
DEAD

and under it, not a great deal smaller: *Rep. Fielding Slain in Times Square.*

The photo below the fold showed a rain-spattered street scene, with a huddle of damp cops and blank-faced officials contemplating a pair of feet that extended from beneath a shrouded bundle. The photographer, Bernie noticed, had blurred the foreground slightly in order to bring the movie marquee, several yards behind the group, into perfect focus. TRIPLE RAW SEX FEATURE, it read.

He glanced automatically at the caption: *The body of Rep. Philemon "Hound Dawg" Fielding, who often boasted of his contempt for the Big Apple, lies in a 44th St. gutter. The Arkansas Democrat was found strangled late last night after an apparent mugging. Story on p. 3.*

As Bernie started to open the paper, the Rajah said, "There's nothing more in the story, except that he wasn't strangled. His neck was broken."

Bernie's greatest talent lay in perceiving what the Rajah wanted done and doing it, without explicit instructions. He reached for the telephone, but his employer's big hand was there first. "Later. Tell me about the hearing."

The hearing: of course. As Bernie mentally arranged his impressions from the day before, a picture formed in his head of the oversight subcommittee's hearing room—large, as befitted Representative Fielding's clout, but at the same

time claustrophobic; a side effect, Bernie thought, of all that ornate Victorian paneling and the sprawling clutter of wires, cameras, and lights. The place was set up to look as much as possible like a courtroom, presumably to intimidate the witnesses and to give the best camera angles to the seven representatives sitting against the far wall, with their foot lickers and assistant tormentors hovering behind them.

As chairman, Philemon Fielding had the central chair, the primary focus of every lens. Press photographers always seemed fascinated by the old horror, and even Bernie could appreciate that his was a face Central Casting would have died to possess. The red-rimmed eyes, sagging jowls, and big ears that had inspired his nickname were there, to be sure, but age and power had decayed the effigy to that of an old, old bloodhound that had spent its life thinking evil thoughts and indulging unspeakable appetites. It was a face most of liberal, literate America had come to loathe—and of course that very loathing made Fielding ever more lovable to the piney woods constituents who had given him twenty consecutive terms in the House.

When Bernie slipped into the hearing room, Fielding had already begun his opening diatribe. "In all my years in government," he was saying as he shook his disgusting liver-spotted wattles at the camera, "in all those many years, I have never encountered such a case as this. I simply cannot imagine how a young woman with so many advantages . . ."

From where Bernie stood, all he could see of the young woman in question, seated with her attorney at a table in the front of the room, was her helmet of curly reddish hair, the back of her neck, and her rather broad shoulders, sheathed in an astonishingly ugly floral print. As Fielding continued, in his cornpone whine, the milky-white skin of her neck darkened slowly.

Bernie worked his way slowly around the edge of the hot, crowded chamber until he could see her face. Too square for beauty, he thought, but not unattractive: good bone structure

framed rather unobtrusive features that would be a perfect canvas for character makeup—and indeed, he now saw, she was very carefully made up for the role she was playing today.

Her submissiveness, as she whispered through the oath and responded to the first few questions, seemed to Bernie artificial in a way he could not immediately define. Maybe there was just a shadow of mockery behind her unexceptionable words—oh, yes, she would try to speak more loudly, sir—but her expression remained respectfully attentive, even when the old congressman took over from the subcommittee counsel and began the barrage of heavy-handed innuendo that was his specialty.

"Don't you remember your mother, Miss Tyrrell?" Fielding demanded. "The lovin' mother who gave up the bright lights of Hollywood to bring her daughter up in a proper home. . . ."

The thought of the late Alys Tyrrell as a loving mother had made Bernie, who remembered the lady, blink. A feather-headed Republic Pictures blonde, he corrected. A ditsy bit player who got pregnant and spawned before her thirty-watt brain figured out what was happening.

Bernie had turned his attention then to the other members of the subcommittee, six jowly shooting gallery targets that nodded solemnly (one of them was nearly asleep) as they listened to their chairman, whose mouth was now a little wet at the corners. Sanctimonious blank-faced dodos, Bernie thought. What were they thinking as their colleague savaged the woman before them?

One of the representatives was clearly preoccupied by the security of his toupee; his hand would dart up to it every minute or two, twitching at the all-too-obvious line between real and fake hair. But the others, bulging slightly in their three-piece suits, had long since perfected a sort of brooding portentousness that concealed what—if anything beyond lunch—was really on their minds.

The Rajah cleared his throat again, snapping Bernie back to the present. "Miss Tyrrell did well at first," he said. "Very

restrained, very in control." It was true. Her conception of the part (or maybe her lawyer's) showed in every word and gesture: earnest, shy, a little dull; a businesswoman, somewhat frumpier than most, whose business happened to be the theatrical company called Hecate Ltd.

"I suppose the old bastard pulled out all the stops," the Rajah said.

"Of course." Hearings were Fielding's special art form, perfected over many years, and like many artists, he clearly derived an almost sexual pleasure from his craft. "He ran through his whole repertoire of insults, but they just bounced off her. I think you would've been—" Bernie pulled himself up in dismay, the words *proud of her* bitten off short. The Rajah was regarding him with apparent amazement. "Anyway," Bernie continued hastily, "it was going well until the counsel—Wiedle, his name is—started asking questions about the working script."

The Rajah's lips pursed. Bernie wondered if he had read *Horseplay in the Capitol Cloakroom*. He'd certainly had the chance, thanks to a discreet burglary organized by one of his bodyguards.

"The working script?" said the Rajah.

"It has everything that happens on stage," Bernie explained. "Everything: sound and light cues, property lists, stage directions. As opposed to the straight text version that Magdalen—Miss Tyrrell—submitted to the National Foundation for the Arts, when she applied for the grant."

"Was there a substantive difference, then?" the Rajah asked.

"Mostly the addition of business," Bernie said. "Things the actors do that aren't reflected in the dialogue."

"I know what business is," the Rajah growled.

"Well, this was what you might call monkey business," Bernie said. "The real rough stuff. Exactly what was going on between the actors who played Fielding and, well, the horse. Plus some other characters." The lawyer felt his face go hot.

The Rajah looked aghast. "You mean someone wrote that kind of thing down?" He shook his head in seeming disbelief.

Bernie shrugged off the question. "It was the stage manager's script. I heard the committee counsel bribed one of the actors to steal it."

"And the stage manager was . . . Oh, *Christ!*" The Rajah walked stiff-legged to the window, looked between the curtains without, Bernie guessed, seeing anything. "I suppose the additions were in her handwriting," he said, not turning.

"That's what counsel was claiming," Bernie agreed.

"And what did she say to that?"

"She'd already blown it. Claimed she'd never seen it before."

"Perjury," the Rajah said slowly. "Will they go for an indictment?"

It was a question Bernie had been weighing, off and on, for a day and a half. "Fielding would've—absolutely. Wiedle? More than likely. He's a mean little creep or he wouldn't have held the job so long. But now that Fielding's dead, the decision is technically up to the new chairman, Stoughton of Connecticut."

"Never heard of him," said the Rajah.

"Born William Warren Higginson Stoughton, blue blood of New Haven," said Bernie. "Now just plain Rep. Bill, another man of the people. When Stoughton first came to Washington, ten, twelve years ago, they were calling him the conservative Bobby Kennedy, but he never lifted off. Wound up as vice chair of this backwater subcommittee, commerce oversight, sitting in Fielding's shadow. He's been quietly shrinking into the job ever since."

"But will he pursue this charge?" said the Rajah, sounding impatient.

"Hard to say," Bernie replied. "He's another suit who needs publicity to prop him up, but it's Wiedle who has the fangs—and the brains. Do you want me to talk to him?"

"No!" The windowpanes rattled in their frame with the

force of his roar, but when he continued his voice had dropped to a low rumble. "She's brought this on herself. Those shows she produced: vile. Performance art indeed. But she's not my concern, anyway. I have done what was proper—far more than was required."

Bernie had heard a similar speech before, and he supplied the response he knew the Rajah expected: "You were very generous—to both of them." But there was something different in his employer's tone, a note that sounded almost like uncertainty.

Bernie waited, saying nothing. At last the Rajah spoke again, studiously neutral. "I'm ignorant of this kind of inquisition," he said. "What happens now that they've got their headlines? They turn her over to the secular arm, so to speak?"

"I guess you could put it that way," Bernie said. "If her attorney's any good, he'll arrange some kind of public mea culpa that'll keep her out of jail." Or maybe a quick leap into Stoughton's well-used bed will do the trick, he added, though not aloud.

"She won't do it," said the Rajah, and Bernie was inclined to agree. The Rajah had frequently risked everything sooner than crawl before an enemy, and the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

"Then do you want me to find out what this Fielding murder's all about?" Bernie asked. There was, after all, a more pressing danger facing Magdalen Tyrrell than a perjury rap.

"What?" said the Rajah. "Oh, that. Yes—but no waves, please."

"She won't find out," Bernie said. "There won't be any trail to you."

The Rajah swung to face him with amazing speed for so large a man. His eyes were blazing. "Find out? It's too late for that. She already knows."

But how could she? Bernie was stunned. He was not a betting man, but he would have wagered his life that Alys Tyrrell had taken her secret to the grave, and all the other

evidence of Roger Channing's amatory misstep had been burned or buried long ago. He was shaking his head to clear it, when he realized the Rajah was speaking again.

"I need to know about this Fielding mess—but don't try to *fix* anything, Bernie."

No fear of that. Bernie had long since learned his own limits, and crimes of physical violence were outside them.

There was clearly something else on the Rajah's mind, and after a moment or two he said, "You've stayed in touch with Eric Szabo, haven't you?"

Not quite an accusation, Bernie decided. "Yes, I have," he said, not quite defiant.

"How is he these days? Still off the sauce?"

It sounded like an idle question, which was as good a tip-off as you were likely to get from the Rajah. "He's in good shape. Ready for . . ." For what? he asked himself, and found no answer.

None was required, it seemed: "I want to see him. Tomorrow."

"Eric gets off work at eight. In the morning," said Bernie. There was no point in asking the Rajah what he wanted with an ex–corporate spy who had a weakness for women, alcohol, and unorthodox solutions. "He may not want to come."

"Bring him to *Utopia Parkway*," the Rajah said. "By nine."

Recognizing the dismissal, Bernie took a step toward the door. Behind him he heard the Rajah clear his throat. "Ah, Bernie . . ."

Again the same note of uncertainty. Bernie turned to face the Rajah, who seemed, for the first time in all these years, to have some difficulty meeting his eye. "Yes?"

"She's . . . there's a resemblance, isn't there?"

"I'd say so. Yes," Bernie managed. But he was thinking, The perfume: she's been here.

7. Szabo

421 West 54th Street, Manhattan; 8:15 a.m. Sunday

By the time Eric Szabo got to the third-floor landing, he was raising his feet by sheer willpower, one smoldering step at a time. The new shoes had been a major mistake, and it served him right for being suckered by a plastic-leather gleam and a $27.95 price tag. "Made on U.S. Army lasts," the box had said. Well, if that were true, God help the poor bloody infantry. A night on their feet in these hellboxes and they'd be bloodier than ever.

Halfway to the fourth floor, he started unbuttoning his jacket. The smell of mothballs, dry-cleaning fluid, and two dozen previous wearers rose up to stab at his nostrils. The jacket, unlike the shoes, really was U.S. Army (eleven wearers back)—military specification at its most durable. It would never die, unless a jacket could die of shame.

His feet were lifting of their own accord now. What was the phrase they used of old horses? *Smelling the barn*; that was it. And here he was, feeling like the oldest horse of all, and

smelling his own particular barn, only in this case he was wearing it.

God, I need a drink.

The thought had been lying in ambush, right there at the arid back of his throat, waiting to spring out. "No," he croaked aloud. "You do not need a drink."

Crown Royal would do the job perfectly: numb the burning feet, mask the headache—even soothe the ugly black-and-blue mark on the left side of his belly, where he'd been wearing the .45 jammed into the waistband of his pants (also U.S. Army Retired, but considerably newer; unlike mil. spec. coats, mil. spec. pants did wear out—crotch first, as a rule, followed by the pockets).

"No goddamn booze," he said a little louder. Some of his subordinates at Paramount Protective would look away when they overheard Szabo lecturing himself, but most of them were so weird or strung out they didn't even notice. He didn't care if they thought he'd flipped, because talking to himself helped, and there were moments, especially after a six-hour shift like the one he'd just finished, when he would fall back on any tactic that kept him sober.

Paramount didn't like its people carrying firearms, of course. But everybody did, and PP, like other uniformed security outfits, couldn't afford to be choosy about its low-level help. When it came to a gun, Szabo was luckier than most: an old friend with access had liberated the automatic, one of the tens of thousands the military was replacing with the new Berettas. When Szabo had enough money, he definitely wanted a Beretta. After he bought the air-cushion shoes, and a decent pair of gloves, and . . .

Canadian Club would be fine, too. Not quite the same incendiary smoothness as Crown Royal, but the effect would be the same. "Death," he croaked. He repeated it for effect and because it suited his mood: "Death." As far as Eric Szabo was concerned, alcohol was suicide. And maybe it was time

to consider that idea again, too—but not till he got out of these shoes.

He had the key in his hand when he saw the light around the door. The faint yellow glow on the worn linoleum sent his brain spinning into overdrive.

Burglar, was his first instinctive thought—in the two months he'd been there, his shabby studio apartment had been tossed twice. But both his previous visitors had simply kicked the door in. (West of Eighth Avenue, the hollow boom of a metal door being smashed was too minor to notice. And too unhealthy.) This time the lock wasn't even scratched.

So maybe not a burglar, Szabo thought, his hand easing away from his waist. And if it wasn't, he was pretty sure who his visitor had to be: the Fairy Godfather, checking up. He rebuttoned the jacket, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. "Hello, Bernie," he said to the rumpled little man sitting on the Hide-A-Bed. "What brings you here? You and"—he nodded to the large figure standing in the shadows—"your friend."

Bernie Plunkett looked like a worn and anxious owl—big round eyes flanking a fussy little beak, and a head too big for his body. He hadn't changed much in the fifteen years Szabo had known him, and his suit, an awful shepherd's plaid, was either the same one he'd been wearing for the past two years or its duplicate. The last time Szabo had checked, Bernie had been pulling down a six-figure salary, but he still dressed like a racetrack tout in a 1970s movie.

Szabo had often wondered, in the early years of their acquaintance, why Bernie went to such lengths to make himself into a figure of fun. Later, when Szabo had a better idea of Bernie's function in the Channing organization, he'd decided that the joke clothes were intended as camouflage for his too sharp brain. Then, the last time Bernie had come calling, to an even shabbier room than this down in the East Village, Szabo had been struck by an illumination, maybe even a genuine aperçu: The suits, the flab, the whole effect, were Bernie's

way of keeping his mind on his work and off the young—well, younger—men he so often dealt with. For someone of Bernie's generation, being a homosexual was something that required suppression, if not outright denial, and Bernie was, in the quaint phrase Szabo remembered his father using, as queer as Dick's hatband.

"You're looking good, Eric," Bernie said, getting awkwardly to his feet. "Very . . ." He groped for a word, and Szabo let him dangle for a couple of seconds.

"Try *lifelike*, Bernie." His voice had come out harsher than he meant it to, and he added, "A hell of a lot better than a year ago, thanks to you."

Bernie cocked his big head as he considered the younger man's remark. "It was nothing much," he allowed finally. "We got you to a place where you could concentrate, that's all."

Szabo shrugged. Anything else he might say would sound ungrateful—and might reveal to Bernie the low price Szabo set on his own existence, which was a secret he wasn't prepared to share.

The large, shadowy man coughed. "Oh, that's right," Bernie said. "*He* wants to see you."

To anyone who was or ever had been one of the Rajah's employees, that "he" needed no amplification. "Not interested," Szabo said. "Maybe another year."

"Sorry, Eric," Bernie said with a meaningful glance over his shoulder. "He *really* wants to see you."

In an earlier life Szabo would have taken on Bernie's big friend, mostly for the hell of it, but now he just said, "This instant, I suppose."

"He hasn't changed," Bernie replied. "I think you've just got time to change, though."

The only mirror was in the tiny bathroom, but Szabo was painfully aware of how he looked—the baggy green uniform with the ugly shield on each arm, *Paramount Protective* in black letters on a Day-Glo yellow field; white shirt that looked as

if it'd been slept in, because it had; the black tie that seemed to draw food stains like a magnet; and those goddamned shoes, with the unearthly gleam. The face above the uniform was no prize, either: skewed nose, Slavic cheekbones, watchful brown eyes, jug ears, thinning brown hair brushed straight back—Szabo's ex-father-in-law, the *Social Register* junk food king, had once said he looked like a Polack light-heavyweight who'd never learned to duck. A vast comedown from the sharp, attentive young security expert the Rajah had hired so long ago. Well, screw the old buzzard, Szabo decided. Maybe once he has a good look, he'll leave me alone. "I'm ready."

The big man in the corner emitted a choked noise. Bernie raised a bushy eyebrow, considered Szabo's expression, and decided not to press the point. "Up to you, Eric."

The car waiting around the corner on Eighth Avenue was a two-year-old tan Honda Prelude, a four-door sedan as forgettable as a car could well be. Unless things had changed, the Rajah had a revolving quintet of them, all with the same anonymity. The two he rode in himself would be armor-plated, reengined, and resprung, but would look from the outside exactly like the others. The idea for the identical fleet had been Szabo's, after three near successful attempts on the Rajah's life. The fourth time the bewildered assassins had hesitated, fumbled, struck the wrong vehicle, and been cut down to a man. Eric Szabo's great triumph; he'd felt sick for a week afterward.

The car headed east across town, and Szabo asked, "What's it all about, Bernie?"

Bernie sighed. After a minute he said, "I think he feels guilty about you, Eric. He feels he owes you."

Well, that was crap and not a very good vintage, either. The Rajah had about as much compassion as a Dachau oven and less remorse than a crocodile. Besides, the abyss Szabo had fallen into—the abyss he was painfully climbing out of—was absolutely nobody's fault but his own; that lesson he'd learned, if no others.

But it'd been a stupid question to ask. The Rajah's passion for secrecy was well beyond the pathological, and he manipulated the men and women around him as automatically as he breathed. Szabo's private theory was that the great man sometimes did it just to stay in practice, but mostly for his personal amusement. Sometimes, to be sure, there was a serious reason, and that was when you wanted to have your wits about you.

The car dropped Szabo off at the side entrance to Grand Central Station on 43rd Street. "We're on track 109 today," said Bernie, holding the door open. He silently considered Szabo's ostentatious shabbiness, shook his head, then said, "Good luck, Eric."

Szabo raised a hand in a mock salute. He had been inside the Rajah's private railroad car, *Utopia Parkway*, just once before, and it had been an impressive—as in petrifying—experience. Over the years Szabo had run into more than his share of powerful and important men, but none who radiated autocracy the way Roger Channing did. It was hard to imagine anyone but a czar, or maybe Genghis Khan, who could be so much at ease with his own despotism.

On his way down to the terminal's lower level, Szabo tested his eye by trying to pick out the Rajah's personal security detail. During rush hour it would've been nearly impossible, and even in the vacancy of a Sunday morning it wasn't easy. The patterns changed all the time, but the basic coverage had to remain much the same, since the station couldn't provide the kind of electronic warning net Szabo had set up for the Rajah's permanent installations.

Four bodyguards he was sure of—five, if the ranting lunatic in the old main waiting room was one of the troops, too. (And if he was, he should be paying dues to Actors Equity.) All but one of them were too professional to give Szabo more than just the momentary blank-eyed appraisal that was standard behavior for New Yorkers.

The gate to track 109 was open, but a man in a conductor's

uniform stopped him. "Nothing leaving till two thirty-five," he said.

"I'm expected," Szabo replied.

The conductor looked him up and down. "A rent-a-cop? Who'd be expecting you?"

It was a convincing performance, but Szabo was in no mood for games. "Roger Channing, but have it your way, sport," he said, and turned to go.

"Hey, slack off, buddy," the man said quickly. "Straight ahead on the left side."

Utopia Parkway sat alone, hissing gently, in the dim platform light. The car was faded and mud streaked, so that it looked from the outside like a beat-up parlor car, right down to the ratty shades covering the windows.

There was another figure to pass, a slight, fox-faced man in a charcoal-gray suit who met him at the door. "I'll take care of the piece for you, boy," he said by way of greeting, and Szabo passed it over without a word.

Inside, the decor was all fussy, expensive-looking Victorian knickknacks that seemed to be balanced on tiny, unsteady tables, so visitors were never at ease, always worrying about knocking something over. The Rajah was a big man, but he moved like a cat, and anyway he knew everything was bolted down. The reverse sides of the shades that looked so worn and faded from the platform were richly somber tapestries—broken columns and irritated Greeks with no clothes on—that made the interior wildly claustrophobic, if you were inclined that way.

Roger Channing was sitting behind a huge mahogany desk, not reading or writing, just looking straight into Szabo's eyes as the bodyguard showed him in. If he even noted the security guard uniform, he didn't show it. The sleepy, yellow-pupiled eyes surveyed the visitor, like those of a lion considering its lunch.

Without being asked, Szabo pulled up a chair that looked fragile but wasn't and dropped onto it. "You called," he said.

8. Brick

LAWRENCE RESIDENTIAL HOTEL; EARLY SUNDAY MORNING

In the hours after midnight, waiting for Magdalen to return, Brick had run through the usual emotions—loneliness, nervousness, anxiety, even fear—and finished, to his own surprise, with hope. Hope (as he finally allowed himself to admit) that she wasn't coming back at all. That this time she was out of his life for good.

The thing was, she scared him. She always had, a little, but in the last two days she seemed to be on a wild, rising high, as if what she'd done to the old man (Brick refused to name the act or the victim, even in his thoughts) had broken some kind of dam inside her. Though he had never been able to figure Magdalen, he could sense, dimly, the ferocious anger that surged in her, raging for an outlet.

The cops didn't worry Brick nearly as much; he'd been questioned again, by a pair who'd come to the apartment this time, and he was sure they were just going through the motions. Anyway, the worst they could hang on him was accomplice after—a charge he knew he could deal his way

out of, though it would mean leaving Magdalen hung out to dry.

Double-crossing Magdalen was another thought he didn't like to have running around loose in his head: she'd always had the ability to read what he was thinking, and now she seemed to see through him as if he were a pane of glass.

Why do I stick with her? he asked himself, not for the first time. Sure she was fantastic in bed—or wherever she felt like doing it, which could be damn near anyplace—but there were other girls who were good in the sack, most of them younger than Magdalen. (How old was she, anyway? Nearly forty, he thought.) Better bodies, too: she was definitely too heavy in the ass, and her tits were beginning to droop. That incredible white skin of hers still drove him crazy, though, and she could do things with makeup that took ten years off her age.

Or put thirty years on it, the way she'd done a few hours ago, before she'd gone out in that bag lady costume. It was a talent that always amazed him, and she had others—she was a better actress than any of the people she hired for Hecate, she really understood special effects (which women almost never did), and she was a business manager who could stretch a dollar to twice its natural size. Brick often wondered why she hadn't gone legit, instead of playing around on both sides of porn's scuzzy borderline. Once, when she was in an especially mellow mood, he'd asked her just that, but she'd only muttered something that sounded to him like "just a mute inglorious Milton." The words had made no sense, but the tone had said *Back off*, and he had.

Where had she gone? Brick had seen, from her expression, that it'd be a mistake even to ask. And he knew better than to try following her—she could slip through a crowd like a handful of smoke, leaving him cursing and shoving in her wake. Probably it was something to do with her goddamn father again (if he really was her father, which Brick doubted): Magdalen Tyrrell's one loose screw and the one thing about her that she didn't know Brick knew. His equalizer.

As always, extended thought made him jumpy and irritable. He thought about diving into the rat hotel behind the Hide-A-Bed and building himself a smoke, then decided the smell would be too risky, with the cops still nosing around. Instead he turned on the TV and grazed around the dial until he found the wrestling (which was always there someplace if you just looked hard enough). Brick, who had wrestled heavyweight in high school, was under no illusion that he was watching a real sport, but he liked the roaring hamminess of it, the off-the-wall costumes of the performers.

It always surprised him that Magdalen liked it, too, and for the same reasons. At least Brick thought they were the same reasons; he was never sure when she was giving him the needle—that, in this case, she was serious when she said she enjoyed wrestlers because they were "the only men in the world with worse manners than professional tennis players. And tackier clothes."

Brick explained to her the fakery she was watching—how, if the holds were applied seriously, most of the matches would be over in five minutes with one of the contestants dead. That amused her, too, and she had made him demonstrate what he meant. At the time it'd been only a prelude to sex, but now, as he watched two huge apes apparently strangling a third, he began to realize what she might really have learned and how she might have used it.

When the wrestling was over, a little after two, Brick found an old western he'd never seen, but one of the bit players was a blond with a face just enough like Magdalen's to put her back in his head. She's not coming back, he found himself thinking. She's made a run for it. He tried to stuff the thought (and the sense of release that went with it) back down into his subconscious and, when they wouldn't go, began trying to figure out where in the world a woman like Magdalen might go for refuge.

In the middle of conjecture he slipped off, and when his eyes opened the sun was clawing at the edges of the window

shade. Magdalen was sitting at the foot of the bed, staring at the TV screen, on which two cartoon animals were bashing each other. She was wearing a pair of slacks and a blouse that looked slept in, and the only trace of makeup on her pale, set face was a streak under her jaw.

Her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying, but Brick had never in two years seen Magdalen cry. In the dim light she looked almost like a child, and he felt a wave of unreasoning pity sweep over him.

After a minute or two she became aware of him. She swiveled slowly, as if moving hurt her, but when she spoke her low voice was quietly amused: "Well: awake at last. Have I ever mentioned that you sleep eponymously?"

She had, several times, and he still didn't get it, but he made what he hoped was an agreeable noise.

"As if you were cemented into position," she said. "Like a brick." Then: "Oh, forget it."

Before he could stop himself, he asked, "You okay?"

She cocked her head as if considering the question seriously. "No," she said. "I am not okay. A surfeit of Weltschmerz, I think."

"Oh."

She smiled at Brick, and though he could easily have broken her across his knee, he felt himself completely under her control. And scared shitless. After a moment she said, "Do you know what it's like to be betrayed?"

He almost answered her, until he saw she wasn't speaking to him. When she was in that particular mood, Brick had learned, it was a big mistake to get between Magdalen and herself.

"I couldn't believe it at first," she continued, her voice level, almost uninterested. "He . . . it was the one thing I depended on. Even if I never needed . . ." She paused. "How could he? That's what I can't understand. Turn his back on me, as if I were nothing."

Now, he saw, her eyes had refocused: she was aware of him,

and that was the trickiest moment of all. He sat unmoving, almost holding his breath, and waited for her to go on.

"When I was a kid," she said, "I always told myself I was alone—Alys didn't count, of course."

She paused, as if waiting for him to say something, and he risked a noncommittal grunt.

"I was kidding myself, even then," she said, still in the same conversational tone. She might have been talking about someone she barely knew, or the weather. "I never knew it till tonight, though. All this time, I was leaning on a dream—and tonight I woke up."

It was like trying to see through a shifting smoke screen: he could almost make out what she was getting at, and then it would be hidden again. Part of him—the part that depended on her—wanted desperately to understand, to soften her grief.

"Right afterward, I just felt empty—like a husk," she continued, her voice unchanged. "Or maybe a bottle: now it feels as if something's starting to fill me up again, and I don't know what it is. Yet."

For an instant the smoke screen parted, and Brick blurted out, "He really is your father. But he won't help you."

Her eyes narrowed, and he flinched from the cold loathing in them. "Just when I get used to you being dumber than shit," she said sweetly, "you have one of these bursts of near human intelligence. It really puts me off."

"Oh, come on, Magdalen," he protested.

"No, I mean it," she went on, her voice all syrupy venom. "You know what Ronnie says about you?"

He didn't want to hear it. Veronica Varley, Brick's costar in *Horseplay*, was entitled to feel sore—literally—after what she'd submitted to, five evenings a week plus Wednesday and Saturday matinees, for six months.

For some reason, he saw, Magdalen had decided to relent. "Never mind," she said wearily. "Ronnie's no one to talk. Bitchiness makes a great seasoning, but it's a bore when it's the whole meal."

"What did . . ." He stopped himself, remembering he wasn't supposed to know Magdalen's father's name. "How can I help?"

A slow smile transformed Magdalen's face, lighting her green eyes until they seemed to glow. "You can be so sweet," she said. "And I can be so mean. We must deserve each other."

He knew the way from here. Slowly he began to push the blanket down his naked body.

* * *

Afterward, while their hearts were still pounding together, her soft body limp on top of his, the phone rang. "Nice timing, tiger," she murmured in Brick's ear.

It was her damned lawyer; the wise-ass nasality made Brick bristle with annoyance.

"Stoughton wants to see you Thursday at ten in D.C.," Shelly's voice said, and Brick felt Magdalen's body stiffen. "An appointment, not a subpoena, which could be a good sign." Two beats of silence. "Or maybe not. Anyway: Meet me at the La Guardia air shuttle counter about seven-thirty. That's in the morning, sweetheart. Bye now."

"Stoughton's one of the other congressmen, isn't he?" said Brick. "What do you think he wants?"

"Shelly thinks he knows," she said. "And I think I can guess." She rolled quickly off Brick and lay at his side, looking up at the cracks in the plaster ceiling. For several minutes she was silent, but he could feel her anger mounting. Even so, when she finally spoke again, her voice was so soft, he could barely hear it. "More than anything else in the world," she said, "I want to make those bastards hurt. No," she corrected herself, "that's a waste of effort. I want them out of my face. For good."

"I know how you feel," he said. "It was like that for me, with that prick Lieutenant Sawyer and his officer buddies."

"The ones you blew up," she said absently.

"No, no," he said impatiently. "It was Sawyer who did the

blowing up, only he didn't know he was doing it. You remember: I told you how I set the whole thing up."

She turned on her side. Her soft body was still gleaming. "Tell me again," she said. Her voice was lazy, but something in her eyes told Brick that the mood wouldn't last.

He launched eagerly into the story, the only really satisfying memory of his army career, yet one he'd never told to a soul, before he met Magdalen.

How he'd worked his way up to corporal and then gotten in the bad books of his platoon leader, Lieutenant Sawyer—one of those fast-talking pricks who could always make you look like a fool. After a couple of weeks, half the officers in the battalion were laughing at Brick, and his life was pure hell.

In fact, he was thinking seriously about a discharge when the battalion went out in the field for a week-long bivouac and some live firing with company weapons. It was on the mortar range one morning that Brick's great idea came to him in a single dazzling burst.

The company was in thick, featureless pine barren, firing at targets on an azimuth of 275 degrees—he would never forget the numbers—and Brick, fooling around with the map, noticed that the bivouac area lay in exactly the opposite direction, 095. And then, when the fire team established the range, four hundred meters, he saw that the straight-line distance back to the bivouac was also the same, only the bivouac, like the target area, was completely hidden from the firing position.

It was nothing more than an interesting observation until Sawyer, who was the range officer, started getting on Brick's case. By the time they broke for chow, he was ready to kill. He'd felt that way before and nothing had come of it, but this time Brick sneaked back a few minutes early and precisely reversed the direction in which the tubes were pointing, while leaving the elevations exactly the same.

The results surpassed his wildest dreams: Sawyer, a careless officer who had no eye for terrain, never even noticed the

change, and when he got back late from the officers mess, he restarted the firing immediately. The first round landed right in the company area, perforated the tarp that sheltered the officers mess, and blew the table and benches into toothpicks, along with lard-ass Lieutenant Sweisguth and his third dessert.

Brick survived the hullabaloo that followed (which was more than could be said of Lieutenant Sawyer), but army rumor, which never sleeps, finally caught up with him, and he was happy to be able to settle for a less-than-honorable discharge.

Retelling the story always made Brick feel strong and smart and pleased with himself, and he was sorry to see that it didn't seem to have the same effect on Magdalen. Still, he knew another, surer way of satisfying her. He took her in his arms and began kissing her with intent, but she didn't respond.

He drew back at last, looking down on her. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I was thinking," she said. "What a shame the whole damn government hasn't got just one neck. *Snap!*"

Brick shivered. "That's no way to talk, Magdalen. You never know who might hear you."

"Well, there's nobody here but you," she said. "And you wouldn't tell on me."

"Me? Never," he said quickly. "You know that."

She regarded him with calm disinterest, and then, for an instant, something flickered behind her eyes—cat's eyes, he thought, deep and cold and private. "All the same," she said. "I wish you hadn't found out about my father."

He shivered again, and this time she saw it. She smiled and took him in her capable hand. "You can make love to me now," she said.

But he knew he couldn't.

9. Szabo

421 West 54th Street; 9:30 a.m. Monday

He took a step backward, then another, to get as much of himself as possible in the narrow sliver of mirror. From a few yards back, the ancient tweed suit didn't look bad, but then it dated from the golden age of Brooks Brothers, when their fabric was expected to last the wearer's lifetime and stop the odd bullet along the way. He'd bought it—when? Certainly in Princeton; sophomore year, he thought, in the process of shedding his Long Island high school skin and growing a proper Ivy League integument.

Through all the years and lives since then, the suit had been the most effective disguise he'd ever owned. When he wore it, people saw whoever went with their own image of gray-brown tweed—poet, academic, author, scientist, and once, with a backward collar, even a high Episcopal cleric from Bucks County. The face remained the unpolished face of Eric, but the cloth was the hairy cloth of respectability.

He considered adding a couple of props, although when it came to trimmings Szabo felt that less was almost always more.

This morning he settled on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and discarded, after a small interior struggle, the pipe he'd never quite been able to believe in. On the lumpy bed behind him lay the cheap, well-worn briefcase he'd bought yesterday from an astonished schoolboy on the street. Big enough for manuscripts, it held at the moment only a spiral-bound notebook, three copies of a résumé Bernie had cobbled up for him, the fall announcement issue of *Publishers Weekly*, and his .45 in a brown paper bag.

He settled the glasses on the bridge of his nose, just above where the old break skewed it, and examined himself through the window-glass lenses. The tie was perfect, boring dark blue figures on a maroon field, but the shirt was wrong—collar points far too long and pointed. He decided to let it pass: one off-key note often made the overall effect more believable.

Time to go. Funny how reluctant he felt. Of course, this was the first time he'd gone up against a member of what he still thought of as the home team. Someone who, from what he could discover, was a bright, sharp new star in the Rajah's firmament.

Not that Szabo was even sure he and Diana Speed were opposed. The Rajah's instructions had been elliptical, even for him.

* * *

"I have a use for you," the Rajah had begun, typically abrupt. "A onetime, open-ended job. Ten thousand cash up front." He paused, and Szabo waited him out.

"Shortly before your indisposition"—a delicate way to describe alcoholic breakdown, Szabo thought—"I acquired a small publishing house, here in Manhattan."

"Wild-Freeman," Szabo said, nodding. "I saw it in the papers."

"Yes," said the Rajah, and Szabo remembered, too late, how much he disliked being interrupted.

"The firm is being run by its treasurer, a representative of

mine named Diana Speed." He paused again, and the calm, deliberate eyes inspected Szabo for a reaction. Finally he repeated, "Diana Speed," and Szabo had the feeling he'd just failed some sort of test. "I've obtained a position for you at Wild-Freeman," the Rajah continued. "Assistant editor. You start Monday. You will receive the usual inadequate salary, in addition to the ten thousand."

Given the conventional wisdom about the Rajah, an outsider might have thought that the right response was a simple "Yes, sir," but Szabo knew better. "For what?" he said.

The Rajah almost smiled—at any rate, Szabo felt a sort of carnivorous grin was just below the surface, even if his expression didn't change. "Mr. Plunkett feels we owe you something. For your previous trouble," he replied. He might just as easily have said, "None of your business," because what Bernie felt or thought had always been irrelevant.

"You don't owe me anything," Szabo said.

This time the Rajah did smile. "Of course not," he said, and after a moment continued: "I am anticipating a . . . difficulty at Wild-Freeman. I don't know what form it will take." Well, that leaves plenty of room, Szabo thought, and apparently the Rajah agreed, because he added, "Not a threat to the firm so much as to me personally."

"Physical threat?" Szabo asked. "Like a bomb?"

To his surprise, the Rajah seemed to mull the question for several seconds before he replied: "I think not. But I could be mistaken."

I could be mistaken. Szabo tried without success to remember the last time the Rajah had admitted that possibility. "From outside the company, or one of the employees?"

Again the Rajah weighed the question, and again his response was perceptibly uncertain: "Could be either way. But I'm confident you'll recognize the danger when it surfaces. It comes from a woman."

Szabo's mouth was halfway open to ask how he would recognize any danger before Diana Speed did. Then it occurred to

him that maybe she was it. But if she was, why didn't . . . He pulled his spinning brain up short, knowing he hadn't a hope in hell of following the Rajah's byzantine reasoning. Not at this stage, anyway.

Szabo had arrived at the interview prepared, he thought, to toss any offer back in his former employer's face. He was not ready for the overpowering tide of relief he felt at a chance of escape, even for the short term, from the brainless hack work he'd been doing. A real job, too—or so it seemed. Even though the Rajah had never offered charity before, Szabo had harbored the suspicion that this time might be the exception, a handout in return for fifteen years' front-line service.

But ten thousand dollars was exactly right, a sum to take seriously and much too large to be a gift. Ten thousand tax-free dollars, Szabo reminded himself, because the Rajah always picked up the tax tab on onetime payments, to encourage the troops.

Far more important—though Szabo wouldn't let the thought surface fully—this might be a chance for him to glue back together some shards of the self-respect he had shattered so completely. Sitting there in front of the Rajah, he realized he would do almost anything to regain his own good opinion of himself. And a moment later he realized that the Rajah had already known it.

So what, he decided. This time, I'm working for me.

The fact that he didn't know anything about publishing or editing barely gave him pause; there was a whole weekend to research it. Anyway, how much could there be to assistant editing? For someone who'd passed himself off as an electronics engineer without knowing an ohm from an erg, this masquerade didn't sound too daunting. "Reports go to Bernie?" he asked. A pro forma question; Bernie was the filter through whom Szabo's reports had always passed.

"No," said the Rajah. "I will give you a number to call the minute you have anything to report. The slightest suspi-

cion . . ." The deep growl trailed off, and Szabo was attempting to absorb this breach of all previous procedure, when the Rajah added, as if the words were being dragged out of him, "The . . . attack may be on my reputation. Some attempt at . . . at humiliating me."

The obvious question had got as far as Szabo's lips when the Rajah rode it down. "That's all. Remember: The slightest hint, call me at this number." As he pushed a white card across the desk, a towering white-coated steward appeared silently.

"Fendant," said the Rajah in quite a different voice, and to Szabo, "A bit early in the day, but I think you'll find it quite exceptional. What a shame the damned Swiss have torn up so many of their vineyards."

For a second Szabo could taste it—the dry, nutlike flavor with just a hint of effervescence. "I'll have a diet Coke," he said. "With a slice of lime, please."

"As you wish," the Rajah said indifferently.

* * *

Who was Diana Speed? Szabo had thought of asking Bernie first, then decided against it. But there weren't many other sources available. Always a loner, Szabo had never been close to his colleagues in the Rajah's service. Anyway, his specialty—corporate espionage, directed at firms the Rajah was interested in—required that there be no visible connection between him and his real employers.

The source Szabo finally fell back on was, perhaps inevitably, a woman. He had always felt comfortable working with women, often more at ease than with men; some of his most spectacular coups, and his most painful memories, had come about because a particular woman seemed to think Eric Szabo needed affection or love—or maybe just tidying up.

Jeri LaBorde was different, though; a former comrade in arms and lesbian to boot, she was an accountant of near genius and viewed life with an accountant's cool caution. Best of

all, from Szabo's viewpoint, she hadn't seen him during the shameful months of his collapse.

"Sure, I know Diana," Jeri said.

"Ever work with her?" he asked.

"Three times." Jeri, he recalled, responded just like a computer: she answered the exact question you asked, no more and no less, and if it was the wrong question, that was your problem.

"What's she like?"

Even over the phone he could feel the barrier go up. Szabo was rephrasing his query in more concrete terms when Jeri finally answered.

"Six feet tall," she said. "Blond, about thirty-five, athletic, why're you asking?"

"I'm lonely. What's she like to work with?"

"Instinctive," Jeri replied. "She knows how to run the numbers, but in the end she always listens to her gut. And she's lucky." Jeri sounded—unusual for her—as if she were thinking it through instead of just accessing the relevant file.

"What you're saying," Szabo probed, "is that she goes by guesswork, but she guesses right."

"No," said Jeri, sounding annoyed. "I said what I meant."

"What about as a person?" he asked without much hope.

"She's too nice," Jeri said quickly.

Szabo had the impression her response had been automatic, which made it all the more valuable. Jeri tried, too late, to snatch it back:

"Not that she's a softy—you double-cross her, and they'll find your body parts all over Fifth Avenue. But . . ."

Jeri trailed off, and Szabo thought he understood. "Collects stray animals?"

"No, she doesn't have any pets at all," said Jeri.

"That wasn't what I—"

"Listen, Eric," Jeri interrupted. "You were too smart to try hitting on me, but I know your reputation. If you're thinking of making a move on Diana, forget it."

"It's not that at all," he protested. "We're going to be working together. I wanted a little background."

"Sure," said Jeri. "Just a word to the wise."

* * *

Wild-Freeman's reception room, on the fifteenth floor of a middle-aged but respectable Fifth Avenue office building, looked the way he'd expected it to. Glass-fronted shelves held row on row of books, from the firm's earliest publications, wrapped in faded art deco jackets, to titles Szabo recognized, from his weekend cram course, as last year's list. Current publications, about a dozen of them in bright, glossy jackets, stood on a glass-topped table and on the receptionist's desk, along with a scattering of catalogs.

Exactly thirty-five seconds elapsed between the receptionist's call and the appearance, down a narrow corridor, of a tall, athletic blonde in her mid-thirties. But not Diana Speed, Szabo decided. This woman was wearing a sort of loose, semitransparent tunic over a pair of iridescent pink tights, and she was barefoot. She saw Szabo looking at her feet, and her large, softly blue eyes darted in momentary panic to the receptionist, a sullen ironclad in a Calvinist print dress.

The blonde stopped just short of the reception room door, and Szabo could feel her willing him to come to her. He struggled out of the soft leather chair, briefcase in hand, and winked at her.

She beamed with obvious relief. "Mr. Szabo? Hi, I'm Joy, Di—Miss Speed's secretary."

"Good morning," he said. "Lead the way."

About three yards down the corridor, whose walls were covered in a fabric that bore an unnerving resemblance to Szabo's suit, Joy glanced back over her shoulder and said, "I always forget them: shoes. Mrs. Spriggs is so uptight about my clothes anyway, and she just convulses about feet."

"Been east long?" Szabo asked.

"About two months," she said, grinning. "I guess it shows."

"From Southern California?"

"North of Ventura," she replied. "La Conchita—a wide spot in the 101. But I'm from Montana originally."

They were passing a series of open doors with no identifying marks on them. The small offices beyond seemed to Szabo essentially identical—jammed bookshelves, desktops piled with manuscripts and proofs. Next to each desk was a business-like gray plastic worktable with a computer on it. Not a person was in sight.

"Editorial conference," said Joy, and, turning sharply, led him into a bleak stairwell. "We're up two."

The seventeenth floor was a warren of cubicles separated by eye-height glass walls that had been covered with memos, charts, calendars, old birthday cards, and family snapshots. The ambient noises—keyboards, telephones, voices—were those of any office, and the inhabitants looked like a random sampling, perhaps a little less formally dressed, of the people on the streets below.

Around the edges of the huge corral were the executives' offices, and Joy was headed toward what seemed like the largest, occupying the corner that faced out on 45th Street and Fifth Avenue. Outside the closed door was a vast computer desktop, with a sound-shielded printer, an untidy rack of looseleaf notebooks, and an oversize color computer screen on which Szabo saw what looked like a game of solitaire, with cards that were not a standard deck yet had an obscurely familiar look; a moment later he realized he was looking at a tarot layout.

A sign on the desktop's corner read JOY SUMMER: YOUR WHEELER-DEALER HEALER in hand-lettered Old English script. "That's from home—my booth at the occult fair," she said. "I keep it to remind me."

"I see," said Szabo.

"And," she added, dropping her voice slightly, "to keep these New York stiffs on edge a little." She knocked twice on the solid oak door. "You're real lucky," she went on. "I didn't

even know we had an editorial opening, and you've got the first interview." She gave Szabo a sidelong look, and he wondered if she were really as extraterrestrial as she seemed.

A high, clear voice called, "Come," and Joy reached for the knob.

"Good luck," she whispered.

10. Diana

WILD-FREEMAN; 10:15 A.M.

She felt her face assume the appropriate gracious lady mask as he stepped in the door, but she knew her eyes were as cool as her voice: "Good morning, Mr. Szabo. Please have a seat."

His return smile was diffident, almost apologetic, and it softened his battered features amazingly. He took her extended hand—his big, blunt fingers felt as if they could crush rocks—and she sensed the calculated degree of firm pressure, the power withheld. It was a grip that would impress most men and nearly all women; it impressed Diana, though she had been expecting something of the sort.

As he lowered himself onto the chair before her desk, she half expected his ancient tweed suit to crackle. His eyes—dark brown and wary—surveyed her office in a single measured sweep that made no attempt to conceal itself. A professional's evaluation, she thought: one that automatically priced the Stobart print on the wall behind her and recognized the computer cables leading from the antique rolltop desk that camouflaged her workstation.

"Thanks for seeing me, Miss Speed. I'm sorry to impose, your first day back."

She very nearly blinked, then decided that the Rajah must have told him she'd been on vacation . . . though he might have deduced it from her obviously tropical tan and the stack of papers in her in box. In either case he was prodding for a reaction from her, an acknowledgment that they were compatriots going through a not-too-important formality.

Not so quickly, my friend, she thought. Your job here may be a done deal, but I want to know why you've come. Correction: why you've *really* come. The Rajah had told her only that Eric Szabo was a valued longtime employee with unspecified personal problems; a man who needed the therapy of work that was intellectually challenging but not too spiritually demanding. The Rajah would take it as a personal favor if Diana could make a place in Wild-Freeman's editorial department . . . as an assistant editor, perhaps. And of course Szabo's salary would not count against Diana's operating budget.

The whole performance had been so tentative, and at the same time so exigent—utterly unlike her employer's normal high-handed–offhanded MO—that she was at a loss to explain it. And why on earth had the Rajah felt he had to carry her off to Barbetta and stuff her with stratospherically priced pasta before making his request?

"I have a résumé, if you'd like to see it," Szabo was saying as he pawed in the old-fashioned briefcase between his feet.

Interesting voice, she thought: a pleasant whiskey baritone. Like his face, it seemed to have had some rough treatment over the years, and it had some unexpected nuances—a foreman's timbre, an Ivy League pronunciation, and no accent that she could identify. Troubridge, who was a fascinated student of the American class system, might have placed this guy, but all Diana could see were the contradictions.

"Of course," she said, and took the sheet from him. Not your basic letter-shop job, she noted. Professional composition and good paper, but neither of them overdone. . . . She turned

her attention to the substance: BA from Princeton, 1970—so she'd been right about the speech patterns, at least. "What's the Barrow Scholarship?" she asked.

He seemed startled, almost at a loss.

"You won it," she prompted.

"Oh, that." He sounded annoyed. "Donated by some long dead obsessive alumnus. The recipient has to come from Suffolk County, Long Island, but beyond that . . ." He shrugged. "I guess every school has a few like it. It helped pay the freight."

And that still rankles, she thought. So why'd you include it? Answer: You didn't—somebody else ran up the résumé for you. "Found money," she said. "No reason not to pick it up."

He shrugged and threw her a lopsided grin, and Diana was surprised at her sudden urge to grin back; she'd been warned to expect charm, but not anything as disarming, or as high-proof, as this.

"Women are his strong suit," Jeri LaBorde had said in the message Diana found on her answering machine the night before. "I don't resonate to whatever he puts out—hell, I wouldn't, would I?—but I've seen him unglue some pretty sharp gals." Jeri had seemed to hesitate, then added, "I guess I'm making him out to be some kind of slimeball, but he's not. We've worked together, and I like him. Just the same, he's coming straight at you, and I just wanted to let you know." Another pause. "I can't say any more—shouldn't have said this much. Don't call, love. Bye."

Diana wrenched her mind back to Szabo's résumé. Four years as a navy officer, starting at the tail end of Vietnam (which made him, she calculated, a year or two over forty); then two years in international shipping, followed by another two years in overseas real estate. (Both ideal cover occupations, almost impossible to pin down.) For the decade leading up to last year, he'd been president and CEO of something called Szabo and Associates, specializing in "composition and preparation of annual and special reports and other business publications."

Was that the connection with the Rajah or just eyewash? Well, she could check it out, and would. "What happened to Szabo and Associates?" she asked.

"We went belly up," he said. He was watching her as if trying to read her thoughts, and he must have come to some conclusion, because she sensed he was nerving himself up for a declaration. "Mostly because I was on a liquid diet," he said. "Canadian Club, three meals a day."

"I see," she said slowly. But there was something wrong about his confession. Though he clearly hated making it, the words came out too pat.

"One day I drove out of my garage, without opening the door," he went on, forcing a parody of his earlier grin. "Broadsided a mail truck. Woke up in the hospital with nothing left. No family, no business, no money. That was a year ago."

His eyes had not left hers, and she could feel him waiting for a response. She gave him her faintest noncommittal smile.

"A friend of mine—of yours, too, I think—got me to a place where I could dry out," he continued, ever more slowly and unwillingly. "I did. Now I'm starting over. End of story." His mouth closed like a trap.

"And a very moral story it is, too," she said, icing her words deliberately.

Without change of expression his face turned from flesh to stone. "I'm being shoved down your throat," he said.

"You are, rather."

"And you don't like it."

"Would you?" she said. The bitterness in her voice surprised her: by now she should have learned how to live with imperial edicts.

"I hope you're not feeling threatened," he said, eyebrows lifting in mock surprise.

Maybe she was, a little, but she was damned if she'd let him see it. "Threatened?" she replied. "Why should I feel threatened by you?"

Slowly his face relaxed into a complicitous, delighted grin. "No reason at all," he said. "I just want to help."

Perhaps, she thought, and said, "I'm delighted to hear it. You can start by giving me a plausible explanation for hiring you."

"Something you can tell your colleagues, you mean?"

"Something *we* can tell *our* colleagues," she corrected him.

He regarded her with visible appraisal. "The truth won't serve?" he asked.

"*The Rajah made me do it?* Unacceptable, I'm afraid."

Amused comprehension lit his eyes. "You don't want your troops thinking they can go over your head?"

This time she couldn't help smiling. "Damn straight," she said. "Why don't you start by telling me why you're here. Honestly."

"Honestly? I don't exactly know."

To her own surprise, Diana found herself inclined to believe him. "Venture a guess?" she asked.

He wanted to say something, she was sure of it, but at the last moment he compressed his lips and shook his head. "Sorry."

"So am I," she said, and let the ambiguity hang for a moment. His sun-roughened face reddened, but he said nothing. So we're not going to be pals just yet, she thought. Probably just as well. Then why am I feeling let down?

"Do you have to give a reason for hiring me?" he asked. "I'd have thought you could just carry it off on the volley."

Now that was a compliment, of a sort. "I guess we're stuck with stonewalling it," she said. "That is to say, *you'll* be stuck with it. Your colleagues will eat you up with curiosity."

"Curiosity I can handle," he replied. It was, she thought, the automatic response of someone confronting a familiar situation.

"What was it you used to do for Himself?" she asked. "Or is that off-limits?"

From the expression that flickered across his face, it was

very nearly off-limits, but at last he said, "Research." She waited, and he added, "Fieldwork, a lot." She waited again, and once more her silence paid off: "Spying, actually."

That might account for why Jeri had worked with him. "Inside the Rajah's tent?"

"Never," he snapped. "Takeover appraisals, mostly—first *whether*, then *how*." He paused. "That's really all I can say."

It might explain him a little, though. Toward the end of Diana's time with Dr. Fasolt at State, she had run a small string of agents in Riyadh, the Saudi capital. She remembered debriefing one of her people who'd left that claustrophobic furnace in a hurry—remembered the sour smell of fear, the violin-string tension he'd brought into the room with him; two weeks later he'd OD'd on Nembutal. So maybe there was some truth to Eric's cover story.

But it was still a cover story, the outer skin of the onion. She would accept it provisionally, she decided, and check it out later. His brown eyes—nice eyes, damn him—were watching her, and again she had the feeling he was following her thoughts. "Let me tell you about your colleagues," she said, injecting a note of briskness into her voice.

"Please," he said, matching her tone.

"To begin with, these are not stupid people—"

"Not if they work with you," he said quickly, then reddened as he saw her raised eyebrows.

He's rusty, she thought. Hasn't done this kind of apple-polishing for a while. "Nor are they unworldly literary types, not these days. Your department head, our editor in chief, is Haskell Rose. He's also our West Coast liaison. His specialty is acquisitions." And lechery, and ambition, and off-the-wall occult weirdness that often sold surprisingly well.

"Haskell Rose," Eric repeated. Diana sensed him recording every word she was saying—and, she suspected, a good deal of what she was deliberately not saying.

"The executive editor is Judith—never Judy—Sanders. She is Wild-Freeman's top working editor: Haskell ropes the au-

thors in, Judy sorts them out." And if they're male and seem promising enough, she also takes them to her bed; Wild-Freeman's house Oscar, in a manner of speaking. Among the staff, though, Judith screwed only Haskell—and only when she had a very important project for which she needed his committed backing. It would be interesting to see what she made of Eric.

"Executive editor," he said. "Means what?"

A perceptive question. In publishing, Diana had discovered, titles were even more slippery than in real life—probably because in publishing, unlike real life, people were obsessed by the subtlety of language. "Here at Wild-Freeman," she said, choosing her words with care, "executive editor is really an honorific. Recognition for work well done."

The brown eyes were warmly amused. "Valued emeritus—but not suitable for line responsibility?" he suggested.

True for you, Diana thought. "Judith *is* in charge when Haskell's out of town," she said.

"Uh-huh." She could see that Eric had mentally filed the executive editor under *unimportant*. Well, he might reconsider once he got a load of Judith's pouter-pigeon chest. "Who runs the department, then—administrates it?"

"That's the managing editor, Tim Mark," said Diana. She saw Eric was watching her with a new interest, realized that the flatness in her tone must have revealed more than she intended. "Tim's just breaking in at the job," she added, and pulled herself up short: Eric's half smile told her he was reading her much too well, and anything else she said would only make her dislike for the young managing editor more obvious. Not that it really mattered; someone as perceptive as Eric Szabo would need all of five seconds to cut through Tim's pompous shell to the priggish, narcissistic, self-righteous interior.

"That bad?" he said, grinning. "Why don't you fire him?"

Diana's ears were burning. "Tim's very bright," she said evenly. "He's also very young."

"Both curable," said Eric. "Who else?"

He was playing her like an instrument, and she knew she had already given away too much. "Why don't I let you form your own opinions?" she said, smiling. And then, in the instant of rapport that followed: "So what is it, Eric? What's the problem at Wild-Freeman?"

Her timing was perfect. She felt him opening up, at least partway. "He wouldn't tell me, Diana. But I'm afraid it might be—"

Behind him the office door burst open. The woman who appeared there was short and very blond, with an astounding figure, china blue eyes, and a generous mouth subverted by her metallic New York voice: "Diana, dear, you know what that little bastard has done now?" She broke off as she saw Eric, and Diana watched, not for the first time, the instant metamorphosis of Judith Sanders in the presence of a new man: her eyes melted, her lips moistened, and her blouse seemed suddenly to reveal a good inch and a half more cleavage. "Oh, dear," she said. "I've interrupted something."

She made no move to go, however—nor would she, Diana knew. "Come in, Judith," she said. "Come in and meet your new colleague."

If nature had equipped Judith Sanders with antennae, Diana thought, they would have been vibrating at nearly the speed of light. As it was, she turned on Eric a searching, omnivorous glare that should by rights have made him burst into flame. "Delighted," she said, making it sound like command and invitation in one, and then, as Diana's words sank in completely, added, "Colleague?" in quite a different voice.

"Eric Szabo," said Diana. "Our new assistant editor. Eric, this is Judith Sanders." Or, if you were following his slightly unfocused stare, *Eric, these are Judith's tits.*

He got to his feet with an economy of motion rare in a big man, his hand extended. "A great pleasure," he said. "I'm really looking forward to working with you."

It was first-class work. Friendliness, admiration, and respect

(but not too much) flooded the office, and Diana watched Judith bloom in the glow. "Yes," she said, sounding a little dazed. Reluctantly she reclaimed her hand. "I didn't know we—"

"Eric's my present to you," said Diana. "To *all* of you," she added, looking Judith directly in the eye. "I've decided the editorial department has been overworked lately. You need extra help." Judith was nodding vigorously; extracurricular efforts aside, she did put in ten-hour days and had just come up for air after spending thirty-six straight hours reorganizing the spectacular but flawed manuscript that would lead Wild-Freeman's next list.

"Strange Haskell didn't tell the rest of us," Judith said. "Or at least me . . ." Her words trailed off as the gathering affront in her face gave way to shocked surmise. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"You're the first person I've told," Diana confirmed.

"*You* hired an *editor*?"

"An assistant editor, actually," said Diana. "I do hope you don't mind my bypassing the usual procedure."

Stunned as she clearly was, Judith could not have missed the warning in Diana's tone. "Not at all," she said quickly. And to Szabo, who seemed to be having some trouble keeping a straight face, "Especially not in this case."

"I'd appreciate your letting me tell Haskell, though," Diana put in.

"Of course, dear. It'll be our little secret." Judith smiled, and Diana cringed internally. She had overheard the staff jokes about Haskell's touchiness, and the editor in chief had complained to her of the lack of respect he sensed around him. The last thing Diana needed was to wind up on either side of that little game.

"Could you excuse us, Judith?" she said. "Eric has some dreary forms to fill out."

"Of course," said Judith, but she was clearly not going to leave without an exit line. "Welcome aboard," she began,

fixing him with what Diana had come to think of as her gobble-you-up look. "I know you're going to fit right in."

"I'll do my best," Eric replied, his voice dripping sincerity. When the door closed behind her, he turned to Diana. "Where were we?"

Very well done, she thought. You're not even breathing hard. "You were on the point of telling me why you're here," she said.

"Yes." But the momentary circuit had been broken; what might have been truth would now be suspect. "He didn't tell me," Eric said, clearly choosing his words with care. "Said he anticipated trouble, but didn't know what form it would take."

That was certainly typical of the Rajah's elliptical briefings, Diana reflected. "Trouble specifically here, at Wild-Freeman?"

"Yes. He said I'd recognize it when I met it." Eric flashed his surprisingly boyish grin. "I don't suppose he meant Judith."

"No." Diana recognized the remark for what it was, the end of serious communication. "We'd better introduce you to Haskell before the jungle drums start up."

As she rose to her feet, her mind was racing: Trouble coming; trouble she hadn't been told about; trouble the Rajah didn't think she could handle. Well, Wild-Freeman was still Diana's home ground, and an intruder like Eric Szabo might find it a very lumpy playing field indeed.

11. Maury

WILD-FREEMAN; 5:30 P.M.

The phone gave the single muted burr for an inside call, and Maury Thomas, the vice president for sales, reached for the handset without lifting his eyes from the daily sales report. "Yes?"

"Maury? Tim Mark here." Since his first editorial buying trip to London, Tim had been affecting an English accent, and it seemed to acquire extra strength over the telephone. "About that notion of yours—the Fielding murder? I wondered if we might chat."

"Sure, Tim." Maury placed a pencil mark in the column of figures he had been contemplating. "Come on up."

"You mean now?"

No, next week, you twerp. "If you're free," he purred.

"What? Oh, quite," the young man replied. "Be right there."

Maury sighed as he replaced the phone. Half his attention was still on the sales report: an obscure first novel was showing signs of unusual life, spurred by a *Time* review that read as if

it had been composed by the author's mother. The question was whether the spurt would last—whether word of mouth from the first wave of readers would translate into the necessary second wave of buyers that could push the book over the top into best-sellerdom.

The novel's first printing had been modest verging on mingy, and half of it had already melted away. On the face of things, this was the moment to go back to press. Or was it?

If Wild-Freeman reprinted and the book's sales died, it meant an embarrassing stack of unsold copies; but if the sales curve continued to climb and the first printing sold out, a delayed second printing might reach the stores only to find that demand had dried up—which meant not only an embarrassing stack of unsold copies, but an author, an agent, and an editor gibbering with fury.

Maury riffled quickly through the previous week's reports, trying to get a sense of the strength behind the climbing sales. The numbers were still on the rise, but instinct whispered that they were cresting, and Maury had learned to trust his instinct. This one was no home run, instinct said; this one was going to drop just short of the fences, a tidy sale but nothing stratospheric.

A knock derailed his thoughts, and he let them go. The visitor was more important and trickier to handle. "Come in, Tim."

Wild-Freeman's managing editor was still in his twenties, a tall, darkly handsome boy with thick curls and burning eyes. He was a great favorite with the youngest secretaries—though not, interestingly, with women his own age or older. Privately Maury thought him a tedious child.

Tim was carrying a folded newspaper, which he held out to Maury. "Did you see this? The police found Fielding's wallet—empty, of course—in a rubbish bin."

The older man glanced quickly over the story's lead, a midday update of the piece in the morning editions. The New York police seemed definitely to be sliding toward the robbery-

with-violence theory, while the feds remained noncommittal. A joint resolution of the House and Senate had deplored the murder. Even the president had joined the chorus of dismay, although—as the reporter noted—Fielding had only last week called him a spineless preppie wood louse.

"The case is still wide open," said Maury. "But if we're going to move on this, we ought to get somebody on it now."

"While everything's fresh," said Tim, nodding vigorously. "Who do you see writing it?"

Maury leaned back in his big, leather-covered swivel chair. "Well, that's really an editorial decision, Tim," he replied with a smile. "Depends on how you envision the concept—a tight, close-up Dutch Leonard kind of thing, or a broad-brush, impressionistic treatment. . . ." Tim was nodding eagerly, and Maury saw he'd already made up his mind. "Maybe we want a writer who can really create a context, make it more than just a single murder in isolation. . . ." He trailed off deliberately, seeing that the young man across the desk was eager to jump in.

Tim's monologue ran its predictable course and ended in midair, as Maury, barely listening, nodded supportively at appropriate moments. It was the kind of conversation he despised, from which no usable decision ever emerged; but it was also the kind of conversation editors seemed enchanted by, and at this moment Maury needed to enchant an editor.

In the end it was Tim who brought up the real subject, with a nervous look over his shoulder at the closed office door. "So what do you think of him, Maury?"

"Your new colleague?" The faint emphasis on *your* brought a flush to Tim's cheeks. "I barely shook hands with the man when Haskell led him around. I don't recognize the name—Szabo, isn't it? Where's he from?"

"Well, that's it," Tim replied, eyes gleaming with malice. "He isn't from anyplace. Never worked in publishing before—used to be in some kind of industrial PR, I think."

"Ah," said Maury, and waited.

"You know what Judith thinks?"

Maury had a good idea, having planted the seed himself, but he said, "Tell me."

"Well, you know the Snow Queen lost her gentleman friend. . . ."

"The one who went back to England," Maury prompted.

"Him. Well, that was months ago." Tim paused. "Could it be this Eric Szabo is his successor?"

"No!" said Maury, widening his eyes. "You really think so?"

"Could be," Tim said with an elaborate shrug. "It's what Judith thinks, anyway."

"But how . . . ," Maury began, sensing that Tim was only too eager to explain.

"It does figure," said the young man. "He came through Diana, after all—first in line Monday morning for a job that didn't exist on Friday, a job we haven't even advertised."

"Is that so?" said Maury, who had been unaware of this element. Christ, maybe I was right.

"Absolutely. I checked," Tim said. "She'd probably prefer a lover from outside publishing. What's more, he's the right age for her—though totally prehistoric for an assistant editor." The young man paused, and Maury let him gather his determination for a long moment.

"Yes?" Clearly Tim had a choice tidbit to present. And equally clearly it was something beyond mere gossip. "This is all off the record, of course," said Maury.

"It'd better be," Tim replied quickly. He hitched his chair closer, leaning across the teak expanse of Maury's desk. "Well, I wanted to make sure this Szabo had been put on the payroll—that *is* my job as ME, after all—"

"Of course," said Maury. And you wanted to know what he was getting, too.

"I went to Glenda in accounting," Tim continued.

Maury noted with amusement that the young man's ears were scarlet: So that rumor was true, he thought.

"She said not to worry. And I said, You mean Diana's already put him on? And she told me that she'd had a call from the Snow Queen, saying that this Szabo's salary was going to be paid directly from the treasurer's office. What do you think of that?"

I think it'll be a cold day in hell before I take Glenda into my confidence, Maury thought. "Very interesting," he said. "Very interesting indeed."

"I bet Diana's cooking the books," said Tim. "I bet this Szabo is her lover, and she's got him buried in the contingency fund or someplace."

It was a definite possibility, Maury decided. "And you're assuming the Rajah doesn't know about this."

"Exactly," Tim replied.

"Are you going to tell him?" Maury asked, and saw his answer in Tim's eyes.

"I really couldn't," said Tim. "It wouldn't be exactly loyal: she is my boss, after all."

"I can appreciate your feelings," Maury said solemnly. "It could be a case where the messenger gets the ax. . . ."

"Oh, it's not that," Tim objected.

"Of course not."

"But it's important that Mr. Channing be told," Tim continued. "I mean, who knows what other little games she's got going? Somebody should tell him."

"Somebody should," said Maury. And somebody will.

12. Magdalen

WASHINGTON, D.C.; 8:45 A.M. THURSDAY

The wind that whipped the leafless branches into a frenzy cut through Magdalen's light coat and made her dress feel like an icy second skin. Only a few minutes before, the streets had been awash with federal employees, gossiping noisily in the verbal D.C. shorthand that seemed to consist entirely of acronyms; now everyone had vanished, swallowed up by the vast, pompous mausoleums that loomed on either side of the park-like expanse called the Mall. Striding a pace ahead of her, Shelly was pointing out the buildings—Agriculture, Commerce, Treasury—as if he were a guide and she some hick high school student. And as if anyone cared which of those arrogant anachronisms was which.

He meant well, she knew—was only trying to take her mind off the ordeal to come. Magdalen tried to play his game, but the question that had been gnawing its way to the surface of her mind during the ride down to Washington finally forced itself into words.

"Can they really send me to jail?"

He stopped dead, staring at her.

"On this perjury thing," she added, and saw his sudden apprehension fade. He's still worrying about Fielding, she realized. He's not really sure I'm innocent. The thought almost made her smile: she had no doubt, none whatever, that she was in the clear on that one. No eyewitness was suddenly going to appear; no—what was the word?—forensic breakthrough was going to happen. Fielding's murder had faded into the back pages of section B, and except for a handful of other politicians and a few rednecks in Hollow Tooth, Arkansas, nobody gave a damn.

"That's why we're here, Mag," said Shelly. "To make a deal and get you out of this mess."

She could sense him wanting to put a comforting arm around her shoulders, and part of her wanted to be comforted that way, though not by a man who smelled like an explosion in a perfume factory and wore plural rings on each hand and a gold ID bracelet. Shelly was probably as close to human as a lawyer could get, but he was grotesquely tacky.

Here I've committed a perfect crime, she thought, and I've got to rely on a Sheepshead Bay ambulance chaser to keep me out of the slammer.

Jail as a real possibility had surfaced in her dreams for the last two nights, bringing her awake in an icy sweat, but the horror of captivity had been a shadow at the edges of her mind ever since a couple of years before, when she'd had to go to the Women's House of Detention to bail out a Hecate performer. Even from outside the cells the demented female shrieks and curses had made her blood freeze in her veins. The noises alone would have driven her crazy in a week, never mind the smells and being surrounded day and night by hundreds of desperate, pawing women—and growing gray and fat and forgotten like the rest of them.

"I don't think I could take being locked up, Shelly," she said. "I'd sooner be dead." I really would, she realized, sur-

prised at the depth of her own emotion. I really would rather be dead than in a jail.

"Well, we're a long way from that," he replied easily. "There's a way out of this—you just trust Uncle Shelly." He hesitated. "And honey?"

"Yes?"

"Whatever happens, don't let that Tyrrell temper get away from you. I mean it, Mag."

Roll up like a hedgehog, Shelly was telling her—or roll over on her back with her legs spread. He was probably right, except that the voice in the back of Magdalen's head was Olivier's, urging her to imitate the action of the tiger, stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood. Cut off their balls. "I understand," she said. "I'll be a good girl—but don't call me Mag. You know how I hate it."

"Whatever you say . . . Magdalen. Now, let's hustle: we don't want to keep Rep Bill waiting."

Directly in front of them the Capitol loomed up and up, huge and white. The thin scattering of tourists climbing the endless steps looked smaller than ants. If this were a Monty Python movie, she thought, an immense governmental boot would come out of the clouds and squash them.

A square figure with crimped hair bustled past, followed at a discreet distance by a cluster of young men who seemed to be genuflecting even as they trotted. "Holy shit!" Shelly said from the corner of his mouth. "Did you see him?"

"Sure," she replied. "He looked familiar."

"*Familiar?* Christ, Magdalen, that used to be Henry Kissinger."

* * *

One whole wall of Representative Stoughton's office was covered with framed photographs of him in ceremonial poses, presumably taken over the course of his political career. They were mostly versions of the same shot, she saw—awkward three-quarter profiles that reeked of photo opportunity: beam-

ing Congressman Wonderful shaking hands with local eminenti (clergyman/hero cop/high school football star/fire chief). And with a few self-important men in mufti who were probably other pols. In the center of the collection, much bigger than the others, a very young Representative Bill shook hands with President Jimmy.

Stoughton must have been a heartbreaker a dozen years ago, she thought—strong nose and jaw, piercing eyes, wavy hair. Even now, with just a small jowlectomy and maybe a quick liposuction around the tum, he could drop into middle-aged costume parts—Roman centurion or *Star Trek* admiral—without a ripple. And he had the kind of portentous voice that an amplifier would love.

He was taken with Magdalen; she was sure of it. Or at least with the kind of submissive mouse she was forcing herself to play this morning. She and Rep Bill were alone in his big office, Shelly having been dispatched to talk over the technical aspects of the perjury charge with the subcommittee counsel, whose name wasn't quite Weasel but should have been. The counsel had looked angry but resigned, and Magdalen wondered how often he got stuck talking to the other lawyer while the congressman made his move on the girl.

Rep Bill was well into his performance. Rocking back on his big leather chair, in front of an American flag the size of a blanket, he was in the middle of a sermon on the rewards of contrition. These rewards, as yet unspecified, would accrue only to the truly repentant. Magdalen had the feeling that it was a matter of minutes before she was going to find out exactly how true repentance was to be expressed in her case; the outline was already clear, and the only real question in her mind was whether Rep Bill would grant absolution right on his large and suspiciously clean desk.

She now appreciated how carefully Shelly had been preparing her for this scene. And what, she asked herself, did it really matter? As a physical ordeal it would probably be no more

painful than sitting on a folding chair watching an amateur production of *The Cherry Orchard*, no more shaming than opening night of one's very own flop.

Yet it did matter, more than she could have imagined. She watched Rep Bill toying with a brass paperweight in the shape of the Washington Monument and found herself almost overwhelmed by the desire to snatch it out of his hands and ram it into the appropriate orifice.

A hidden buzzer made her jump, but Rep Bill only swiveled partway around on his big chair and said, "Yes, Doris?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, sir," said a voice from under the desk. (And not sorry at all, Magdalen thought.) "You have your meeting with the majority leader in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Doris," Stoughton said. He swiveled back to Magdalen. "Affairs of state, I'm afraid."

"Of course," Magdalen replied, knowing that an awestruck simper was expected but unable to manage one. "With a schedule like yours, it must be hard finding time for someone like me."

"Well, you're right, Miss Tyrrell," he said, bestowing a smile. "But that's what we're here for, after all. Sooner or later, everything in this town boils down to the individual citizen. John Q. Public—or Jane, of course." He pushed back the desk chair and got to his feet. "I don't think we've entirely finished our discussion," he added.

"No, I suppose not," she said. Here it comes.

"I do hate trying to get to the heart of a subject when you're at the mercy of the darn telephone," he said, looking directly into her eyes.

As if on cue, the buzzer shrilled again. "Ten minutes, sir," said Doris's voice.

"On my way." And to Magdalen, with a chuckle: "Trouble is, a man in my position is always being interrupted, here in the capital."

"I guess so," she said, rising slowly. He was a big man, as

tall as Brick and heavier. He would look lovely in a coffin, she thought. With that brass Washington Monument through his tiny, black heart.

"Wait a minute: there is one place," he said as if he'd just thought of it. "The subcommittee keeps a room not too far from here. For witnesses—in case they have to stay over in D.C. We could meet there." He seemed to be having trouble meeting her eye as he opened the desk drawer and took out two keys on a metal ring, with a red plastic tag. She could read the room number from where she stood. "Shall we say eight o'clock?" He was holding the keys out to her. Numb, she watched her hand accept them.

At the door he turned. "When you get there, you don't have to go past the desk," he said, speaking fast. "There's a back entrance, from the parking garage. The small key's for that door."

* * *

She and Shelly were sitting side by side, high in the visitors gallery of the House of Representatives. Below them a handful of congressmen gossiped, dozed, or read as one of their number droned into a microphone.

"What's the matter, Shelly?" she whispered. "You haven't said a word since we got out of there."

"It didn't go too badly," he said, looking straight ahead.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she replied, feeling her gut tighten. "Shelly, talk to me. Tell me what's going to happen."

"Not so loud, Mag." She could see he was pulling himself together. "Look, I had to give them a month, maybe two. Three at the outside, but only if the judge—"

"You're talking about jail, aren't you?" she demanded. Among the spectators near them, a few heads turned. She took a long breath, exhaled, and began again: "I thought you said—"

"It's because of that old bastard Fielding," he interrupted. "Wiedle, the counsel, says the cops haven't a clue who killed

him, so they've got to put the blocks to a few people like you, as sort of a memorial gesture to the great man."

"Memorial gesture?" she hissed. "What is this, ancient Egypt? Why don't they just bury his secretaries with him, or a few of his favorite blue movies?"

Shelly continued as if she hadn't spoken: "It's the other congressmen on the committee, Wiedle says. Scared the voters are going to take Fielding's murder out on them." He lifted his shoulders helplessly. "I did my best, Mag: he wanted a year."

A year. Down on the floor, the speaker was replaced by another. An all-blond family of six, graduated as precisely as the Russian dolls that fit inside each other, slid noisily onto the row of seats ahead.

"It's not the kind of place you're thinking," Shelly was saying earnestly. "Crooked stockbrokers get sent there—they call it Club Fed."

And crooked congressmen? Where do they get sent? "Three months, you said?" Her voice sounded as stunned as she felt.

"At the absolute outside," he said. But she sensed there was more and was sure of it when Shelly lowered his voice to where she could barely hear him. "One other thing I have to tell you, Mag."

What else could there be? she wondered. "Spit it out."

"This evening . . . ," he began, his face reddening.

"What about this evening?" She felt completely hollow.

It took him nearly a minute to form his words. "Before your"—a beat—"appointment with Stoughton . . ." Again he dried up.

Well, she might have guessed how much of a secret the congressman was to his employees. "At the no-tell motel, you mean?"

"You got to see Wiedle," Shelly mumbled. "Seven o'clock. He gave me a key to give you. . . ."

"He *what?*" The all-blond family turned as one and glared at her.

"Look, I'm sorry," Shelly said, ignoring them. "That's the way it goes in this town. Wiedle's on the way up, and he figures it's time he had some perks."

Magdalen was on her feet before he finished, and she heard him hurrying after her. Outside, in a corridor, they were swept up by a passing tour. The guide, an egg-shaped, middle-aged man with a California accent, was talking: ". . . on that night, every seat in the chamber is filled. Both Houses of Congress, the vice president, the nine justices, the cabinet—and, of course, the president himself. All the nation's political leaders, in fact. An inspiring moment."

Shelly grabbed her sleeve, dragged her to an unwilling halt. "I know how you feel. . . ."

"I doubt that, Shelly," she snapped. "I really do."

"Oh, come on . . ."

"Maybe I'm lucky they don't both want to jump me at once."

Her icy snarl dropped neatly into a gap in the tour guide's spiel, and he turned to stare first at Shelly, then at Magdalen. All at once the whole group was watching the two of them greedily. Shelly went pink, and for the first time in her life Magdalen found herself frightened by an audience. "I've got to get out of here," she said, turning away.

"What about Wiedle?" Shelly called out.

"You made the date—you screw him," she said over her shoulder.

She heard his footsteps behind her on the marble floor. "Wait!" he cried. "Mag, don't be stupid."

She kept on moving, not looking back, but as she neared the stairs, she could hear another tour guide addressing a different group: ". . . called the State of the Union Address, the president's annual accounting for his trusteeship, if you will. On that night, every seat in the chamber is filled. . . ."

The answer, fully formed, came to her as she emerged from the building into the icy blast whistling down the Mall. As she clattered down the long, long flight of steps, she glanced

back just once, to see Shelly standing at the top, hands on hips, watching her. She groped in her purse, found the keys Stoughton had given her, and hurled them away. She heard the clink of metal on stone but never saw them land.

Now you've done it, she thought. Burned your bridges for good. But she didn't care, because she knew how she was going to get all of them.

13. Diana

Wild-Freeman; Friday Morning

As a rule, Diana felt, business meetings were just dramatic renderings of decisions that had already been made elsewhere. By that standard, the twice monthly Wild-Freeman editorial meeting was an orthodox function, though "editorial" always seemed to her a misnomer, since the editors were only suppliants, offering up their proposed projects for financial judgment by a tribunal comprising the heads of the company's business departments, with Diana in the chair.

Approval at editorial meeting came, in theory, by consensus; in fact, of course, some opinions were considerably more equal than others. Sales and subsidiary rights (which handled such elusive but potentially lucrative assets as paperback publication and book club usage) were the heavy hitters, but Diana's own power was too obvious to hide—no project could go forward without her approval. Still, she normally intervened only when she was convinced her colleagues were not just wrong, but disastrously wrong, or, even more rarely, under direct instruction from the Rajah (who received an advance copy of the

agenda). For her, the editorial meeting was partly ceremonial, partly a way of reminding sometimes fractious subordinates who was in charge, and most important a convenient point at which to take the company's pulse.

Today, as she settled herself at the head of the conference room's big, rectangular table, her senses were sharpened by her week-long absence as well as by the presence of Eric Szabo, who sat demurely at the opposite end. On Diana's right were the four business heads, in order of descending seniority. Maury Thomas had the chair next to Diana's; smooth, pink, and white-haired, he looked like a benevolent grandfather rather than the man known throughout the company, and ambivalently, as the Silver Fox. His three-piece gabardine might have been more appropriate in a slightly warmer climate, Diana thought, but it encased him as smoothly as any scuba diver's wet suit, and with considerably more elegance. Predictably, a miasma of the most expensive men's toiletries hung about him.

Next to Maury was a relatively new face, Clif Burrell of sub rights, whom Diana had hired from a foundering literary agency. Youngish, nearsighted, and slightly overweight, he always wore brown suits, of which he seemed to have half a dozen. He had a personality like wet cardboard, which was unusual in Diana's experience of salespeople, but his previous record, especially with foreign sales, was excellent.

Sy Hochhauser of production looked to Diana like a disillusioned academic, with his sad, pale face and wire-rimmed glasses. For twenty years he had dealt with editors and authors at their least reliable, which probably accounted for his permanent air of depression.

Farthest from Diana on the business side, ad/promo's Marla MacIntyre was whispering in Sy's ear. She was barely thirty and had come up through Wild-Freeman's ranks, having begun right out of college as a trainee in the publicity department. Her youth and her black skin sometimes led people to impose on her, but few tried it twice. Her talent, in Diana's opinion,

was nowhere near equal to her ambition, though she had so far avoided the twin pitfalls of her specialty, cynicism and credulity. She had also avoided, on her upward journey, the seduction by Maury Thomas that seemed almost a rite of passage for young females on the business side.

Led by Haskell Rose, the three senior editors came into the room together, a determined-looking clump who always reminded Diana of a team taking the field after a losing first half. With an abrupt nod to Diana, Haskell collapsed onto the seat on her left, across from Maury. Wild-Freeman's editor in chief was narrow shouldered and weedy, yet running to flab around the middle. The expression on his long face suggested a constipated sheep, and Diana knew that when he spoke, his nasal bleat would match his appearance with uncanny precision. His clothes—trendy, baggy suit of geometrically patterned mystery fiber and extrawide, high-decibel tie—seemed designed for someone much younger, and they made him look even older than his sixty-one years.

Next to him, Tim Mark was ostentatiously rereading the agenda, as if he might find some deep secret in its shorthand jargon. Much as Diana disliked the managing editor, she had to admit he was an exceptionally good—or lucky—judge of salable fiction. That he was almost ridiculously beautiful, with his short, curly hair and strong-boned face, was something she had learned to leave out of her reckoning.

Judith Sanders had given up her regular chair to sit beside Eric and positioned her copy of the agenda so that by leaning into her he could read the single sheet. The new assistant editor's bicep was pressed firmly against Judith's left breast, and his attention seemed divided between the agenda and the view down her open blouse. As Diana watched from under her eyelashes, Judith highlighted in pink two items on the single page; from their position Diana knew they were "JS: Wallenberg, Novel about Female TV Producer" and "JS for RTL: Korenyi, Cooking w/Great Chefs Hungary," the titles she would be presenting: a salaciously promising novel on her

own list and, for Rose Lawrence, the cookbook editor, a new volume in one of Wild-Freeman's more successful series.

Behind Diana, Joy Summer, who kept the meeting's official notes, cleared her throat. "Right," said Diana, and tapped the water glass in front of her with her pencil.

All the voices in the room cut off abruptly, except for Tim's, addressing Eric: ". . . do hope this will give you some small notion of what we're up to here at W-F."

Tim in full pompous mode could irritate Diana almost past bearing, but in this case she was interested to see how Eric would take being condescended to by someone almost young enough to be his son. For a second he sat silent, head cocked inquisitively, as if considering some message beneath the words. Then a slow smile lit his battered features. "Thanks for letting me come," he said smoothly. "I'm sure it'll be very educational."

Why is Eric playing Baby Jesus Meek and Mild? she wondered, and a moment later saw the answer to her own question: Tim, besides putting down his new colleague, was making a public statement—and Eric had seen it before Diana did. Maybe I shouldn't have taken that vacation. Well, there wasn't time to brood about it now. She said, "Haskell, I think you're up."

The editor in chief's first presentation appeared on the agenda as "Meredith, 2-bk contract: Secret Wisdom of Pyramids and Untitled Second Bk" and was the latest in Haskell's long and commercially successful obsession with the occult. His colleagues managed to combine cheerful contempt for the books' subject matter with healthy respect for their sales potential—a sort of doublethink that sometimes made Diana a little queasy, even though she herself had the born New Yorker's delight in creative chicanery.

Haskell, knowing where his audience's interests lay, spent only a couple of sentences on the first book's thesis, which Diana decided was lunatic but harmless. He then rattled off, from memory, the sales records of a dozen published books on

the same theme, while emphasizing that those titles had only whetted the reading public's apparently bottomless appetite for the manuscript he was presenting.

Without pause he then ran through a list of publicity ideas, suggested a potential paperback sale, and concluded to the production chief: "Clean manuscript this time, Sy—he's not paying his typist with 'shrooms anymore." Sy obliged with a pained smile.

Haskell looked to Diana, who said, "Comments?" in a voice of studied neutrality. Eric was watching her, one eyebrow slightly raised. Yes, but it pays the rent, she thought, and he grinned as if she had said the words aloud.

On both sides of the table, eyes turned to the sales director. Maury shot his cuffs by way of preamble, revealing heavy gold cuff links inscribed "MT" in Gothic script. Using only his perfectly manicured fingertips, he picked up a sheet that seemed to be entirely covered with figures, holding it far in front of him. After a long moment's silence he spoke: "A good sales record," he said in the manner of a benediction. "Maybe not *quite* as good as the numbers Haskell gave us"—his pale eyes twinkled around the table—"but good enough to go for fifty on this one."

"And for the second title?" the editor in chief demanded. "It *is* a two-book contract, Maury."

The sales director's smile was a masterpiece—warm as the summer sun but delayed just long enough to reveal it as a conscious production. "As I think I've said before, Haskell, I do prefer second books in a two-book deal to have a title. Or at least a subject."

Diana suppressed a sigh: if Maury was going to needle Haskell right from the starting gun, it'd be a long morning.

"Maury, I couldn't agree with you more," said Haskell, projecting earnest agreement. "But we all know how friend Meredith works."

"That's for damn sure." Maury laughed. "The stars tell him what to write next."

Time to step in, Diana thought. "How much are you looking for, Haskell?" she said.

The editor in chief hesitated, his eyes still on Maury Thomas. At this point in the sparring, Diana knew, neither man wanted to be the first to name a figure, but she was in no mood for the usual waltzing around.

"How about seventy-five for the pair," she said, and as Haskell opened his mouth to object, she added: "With a twenty-five-thousand escalator on the second if the pyramid thing advances more than . . . how much, Maury?"

The sales director blinked, and she saw she had caught him—as intended—on the hop. But he was not about to commit himself: "I'm sure you have a figure in mind, my dear."

"Why don't we kick in the escalator at, oh, fifty thousand copies?" she said.

"Suits me," Haskell said quickly.

Maury pursed his lips. "Well, it sounds safe enough," he said. "But I don't know. . . ."

"It's your own escalator clause, Maury," she said. "The same one you've come up with on Meredith's last two contracts."

Someone on the other side of the table—Clif, she thought—swallowed most of a chuckle, and Maury's eyes hardened.

"Objections?" Diana asked the table at large, thinking, I overdid it: not smart. "Consider it done," she said, and over her shoulder to Joy: "You get all that?"

"Engraved in stone," her assistant replied cheerfully. And it might as well be, Diana knew: for all Joy's affectation of airheadedness, she had a phonographic memory for detail.

Diana glanced down, unnecessarily, at the agenda before her. "You're next, I think, Tim. The new Dimmock thriller?"

"Yes," the managing editor said automatically, then caught himself. "Actually, I'd like to bring up an idea that's not on the agenda—with the meeting's indulgence, of course."

"I'll second Tim's suggestion," Maury said quickly. "I think he's on to something really hot."

Diana allowed herself a single scan of the table, saw that Tim's highly irregular request had taken only her—and possibly Eric—by surprise. Why, it's a little baby power play, she thought. And it's got Maury's paw prints all over it. "No objections?" she said. "The floor is yours, Tim."

"Oh," he said. "Uh, right." He fumbled among the papers in front of him and pulled out a manila folder. "Everybody's heard—well, Diana was out of the country, of course—but everybody else has heard about the murder of Representative Fielding in Times Square." He turned, with some ostentation, to Diana: "Philemon Fielding—priceless name—a very senior congressman from Arkansas. Hated by everyone from the capital establishment to the National Book Committee. He was the one who . . ."

Oh, yes, Diana thought as Tim rolled on, I remember old Hound Dawg. It was certainly true that official Washington had hated him, though they'd probably feared him more. And, in their curious, twisted D.C. way, admired him precisely because he could inspire their hatred and fear. Diana had even met the old horror once—welcomed him to the elegant town house in which she was enduring the single most demeaning, stupefying year of her existence, as a congressional wife.

The marriage had ended four—no, nearly five—years ago now: a disastrous mistake on which Diana had embarked as if in a trance, impelled by a backwatered career and the imperious French viscountess who happened to be her mother. Most of those twelve and a half months were mercifully blurred now, but occasional nightmare snatches would still surface from time to time, and Philemon Fielding was in one of them, leering up at her in the midst of a grossly tasteless anecdote. When she'd seen one of the follow-up stories about his murder, on the front page of *The New York Times*, she had felt nothing but a perceptible twinge of satisfaction.

". . . no matter how the case comes out, it's still a book," Tim Mark was saying. "Only the slant is different—right, Maury?"

"That's for sure," Maury replied. "If they solve it, you've got a good whodunit—"

"They won't solve it," Haskell interrupted. "I mean, maybe they'll arrest some poor slob, but they won't catch the real killer."

Maury raised a magisterial eyebrow. "Is that so? Mind letting us in on the secret, Haskell?"

"Well, it's so obvious," the editor in chief replied. "Old what's-his-name's been giving the Washington establishment fits for years. They finally had enough and offed him." Haskell looked around the table, as if amazed at his colleagues' denseness. "It's a conspiracy. Like Dallas."

Memories of the Washington establishment flooded Diana's mind. (Representative Upfield had been at its epicenter—still was, for all she knew.) The idea of a homicidal conspiracy mounted by that collection of blow-dried blowhards was irresistibly amusing, and a single explosion of laughter escaped before she could choke it off. Suddenly they were all staring at her, visibly shocked (and in Haskell's case affronted).

Unexpectedly, it was Eric who came to her rescue. "The case does seem to have drifted off the front page, though," he offered. "I wonder if it might just fade quietly into oblivion."

"Probably they won't even make an arrest," Clif agreed. "Too many suspects, and probably half of 'em too doped up to even remember if they did it."

Tim stepped in quickly at this sign of ebbing enthusiasm: "That's just deception, to put the killer off guard. We've got a pipeline into the police department, thanks to Marla. Her brother's on the force."

"My brother's an attorney, in the Brooklyn DA's office," the young woman said stiffly. "Not the same thing at all."

"Well, it's basically the same part of the forest," Tim said soothingly. "Anyway, Marla tells me that Fielding's murder is topic A for law enforcement, even out in the wilds of Flatbush."

But Marla seemed to have her back stubbornly up: "In this city, there's a new topic A every day," she said. "Especially

if you're in law enforcement. Besides, the word is that this case isn't going to make anybody rich and famous, unless it's the feds."

"They're stiffing the local cops, is that it?" Haskell said.

Marla shrugged, a marvelously dismissive gesture that somehow involved her eyebrows. "Like always," she said. "You can't blame them: they're feeling a lot of pressure from Washington—from Congress especially. And Congress is who pays their salaries."

Tim's half-formed project had got away from him, Diana saw, and Maury was not about to go out on a limb and help him rescue it. The young managing editor's face was chagrin red, a color that suited it nicely, she thought. But there was no point in humiliating him further. "What we might do," she suggested, "is put out word that we're interested in seeing proposals for a true-crime book on the killing. . . ."

Tim was not too fuddled to see the chance for honorable retreat: "Let someone else do the spadework, before we commit?"

"Exactly," said Haskell. "Now, who—"

"It's Tim's idea," Diana interrupted. "He can follow up." She turned to Judith: "What has Ms. Wallenberg got for us, dear?"

"The working title is *Springtime of Desire*," the executive editor said crisply. "It's vintage Wallenberg—plenty of heaving, snow-white bosoms and a tasteful dollop of bestiality."

* * *

The meeting adjourned at noon for the company-sponsored lunch held, by long established tradition, in a private room at the Harvard Club, three blocks away. In days past, old Henry Freeman himself had presided and, being a three-martini man, had seen no reason to stint his employees after a long, dry morning. Unlimited booze on top of a sudden relief from nervous tension had produced some notably incoherent postmeeting lunches.

Diana had changed all that, to the annoyance of Maury Thomas and the relief of everyone else. Her first inclination had been to cut out free drinks entirely, but Maury had argued that some lubrication was vital, if only in view of the food. Accordingly, Diana had given instructions that one carafe of white wine and one of red should appear with the meal.

She herself felt no need to attend, since Tim (the company's only Harvard man) could sign the bill. Instead she would order the largest, messiest, most calorific sandwich on the menu at Wolf's Delicatessen and send a messenger to fetch it back to her office, along with a slab of cheesecake only slightly smaller than a city paving block. So it was that she was sitting at her desk, staring blindly at one of Haskell's more artistic expense accounts but seeing in her mind's eye a roast turkey on black bread with sliced tomato, pickle, and Russian dressing, when she heard a soft knock at the door.

14. Szabo

When Eric entered he saw Diana seated behind her desk, frowning at a form he recognized as Wild-Freeman's personal expense account. "That was quick," she said, then looked up and saw him. "I thought you were my lunch. What's up?" She slid the expense form under another piece of paper, but not before Eric recognized Haskell Rose's sprawling signature at the bottom.

"Sorry to bother you," he said. "Something you ought to see."

Her expression never changed, but he could feel the wall go up between them. "Oh?" she said.

He held out the brown envelope the messenger had brought—"Eric Szabo: Deliver in Person"—and watched her open it and remove the smaller envelope, a standard white number ten with the Wild-Freeman logo and the address:

Roger Channing, Esq.
Personal and Confidential

"It came from Wild-Freeman last night, in the interoffice bag," he explained, answering her unspoken question. "The Rajah winged it back to me this morning."

For a moment she balanced the envelope on her fingertips, her lips pursed, then extracted the plain sheet inside and unfolded it. Her expression never changed as she read it. "Well, well," she said. "Someone's in a hurry." She set the paper down gently, as if it might shatter. Eric's eyes went to the single printed sentence on it, though he had already memorized the words: *Diana Speed has put her lover Szabo on your payroll.*

"Sorry," he said.

Her wide mouth twisted in what might have been a smile; or just contempt, though her cool blue-gray eyes (Who do they warm up for? he wondered) looked genuinely amused. "Sorry for what?"

He almost said, "Sorry it isn't true," but realized in time what a mistake that would be. "Sorry to be the bearer of . . ." He hesitated and finished lamely, "Another damn nuisance. Or maybe the cause."

"Don't give yourself airs," she said, and now her smile was surely real. "Consider yourself a catalyst."

So she had picked up the same nuances at the editorial meeting, he thought. "I think I can guess who's behind it," he said. "And this"—he reached across the desk and retrieved the message—"may be the proof."

"Is that so?" she said, one eyebrow cocked upward.

Something in her tone made him suddenly cautious. She knows who sent this, or thinks she does. "We'll see," he replied.

The telephone burred softly, and she picked up the handset. "Diana Speed." A woman's voice on the other end, Eric thought. An excited, slightly frightened woman. Diana's eyebrows registered surprise. "You told him Mr. Channing's not here, of course," she said. She glanced to Eric and rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Absolutely not," she said. "Mrs. Waldman, you know we never release that information."

Someone—a man—wanting to see the Rajah, Eric thought. That must happen fairly often. So why was Mrs. Waldman,

the seventeenth-floor receptionist, in a flap? Eric knew her only by sight, but she had an air of glacial self-control that almost matched Diana's.

"What does he mean, a woman told him Mr. Channing would see him?" Diana demanded. "What woman?"

Eric's ears pricked up, and he remembered the Rajah's fragmentary, grudging instructions. His sudden intentness must have showed on his face, for Diana, still listening, looked a question at him. "Got to talk to you," he mouthed carefully. "Now."

To his relief, she got it. "Mrs. Waldman, I'll call you right back. Stall him." She hung up. "Well?"

"Look," he said, thinking fast. "The reason I'm here: I'm supposed to be heading off a threat to the Rajah—a threat to him personally."

She caught the distinction instantly: "Rather than to Wild-Freeman," she said. "But coming through the firm, presumably." She rocked back on her chair, eyes narrowed. "Are we—Wild-Freeman—the only channel for this danger? Or do you know?"

He was beginning to see how Diana qualified for the Rajah's special team. The same question had occurred to Eric, but not until several hours after his interview aboard *Utopia Parkway*. "I don't know," he replied. "My guess—and it's pure guesswork—is that this is a single-track threat."

If Diana agreed, her face gave no hint of it, as she considered the problem. "A physical threat?" she asked, and, before he could speak, answered her own question: "No. Or not primarily."

"He's not sure—I asked the same question." Their eyes met, and he felt the current jump the gap between them. She felt it, too: under the tan, her skin darkened slightly. Before he could stop himself, he added: "The Rajah thinks the threat may be to his reputation. Maybe an attempt to humiliate him."

For the first time she looked startled. "Humiliate him?" she repeated. "He used that word?"

"He did. And there's more. He expects the attack—or whatever it is—to come from a woman."

"I see," she said. He thought he heard amusement in her voice. "So you've decided the woman is not me."

He had, and some time before, though he couldn't have said why. "Yes."

"Well, let's hope you're right," she said. Her sudden grin transformed her almost haughty face into a mischievous girl's.

"I'm banking on it," he replied. "I think we'd make a good team."

He felt, almost heard, the thread between them snap. "Perhaps," she said, but she was gone, withdrawn back into herself.

Somebody really scarred you up, he thought. And the scars are still fresh.

"Mrs. Waldman's hanging by her thumbs," she reminded him. "What do you want to do?"

The idea had come to him out of the blue, and instinct told him to follow it. "It's a man who wants to see the Rajah, right?" She nodded. "Well, let's oblige him."

As he'd expected, she picked up his meaning immediately: "With you in the title role?" She almost concealed the sequence of her thoughts, but he thought he saw doubt, interest, and quick decision follow each other in her eyes. "You don't look like the Rajah—"

"Let's gamble our visitor hasn't seen a photo."

"—so you'll need an impressive setting." She lifted the phone, punched a number. "Muriel? Diana Speed. I want to borrow Mr. Thomas's office for a few minutes. Right now." A muffled squawk from the other end. "Just vanish. Go to lunch or something. I'll be completely responsible." She hung up and glanced at Eric, her lips twitching with suppressed laughter. "Think you can live up to the surroundings?"

"The hall of the mountain king? I'll do my best."

Her eyes sharpened; for just an instant she surveyed him with a purely personal interest, and then she was business again, speaking to the receptionist: "I'll see the visitor myself,

Mrs. Waldman." She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "I'll be your faithful assistant—and your audience. Now, get moving. You've got exactly thirty seconds to dress the set and get into your part." As he hurried from the office, he heard her say, "Mrs. Waldman? I'm on my way."

The first problem was the absurdly large nameplate on Maury's office door. Eric grabbed up the fresh blotter from the secretary's desk and taped it in place to cover the lettering, then swung the door all the way open, out of an oncomer's field of view.

The office was large, and Maury or his decorator had filled it with what Eric thought of as proto-Wagnerian furniture—dark, heavy, portentous; the desk chair looked like a throne on casters. The walls were a monument to Maury's self-esteem, from the framed army good conduct medal with its fulsome citation, to the stuffed tarpon above and behind the desk, to the certificate, mounted in silver, from the American Booksellers Association. But no photos of the sales director himself, thank God. . . . No, there was one: Maury and a woman who looked like Zsa Zsa Gabor, enough teeth between them to fell a redwood. Eric lifted the picture from the wall and propped it behind the desk.

He was settling onto the desk chair (padded, he noticed, to increase the occupant's apparent height) when he heard a nasal, Bronx-y quaver totally unlike Diana's normal speaking voice: "Right this way, *Señor Coronel*."

Maury had left a thick printout of daily sales reports on his desk, and Eric was pretending to scan them, a pencil in one hand, when Diana led the visitor in. He straightened up slowly (the man of vast affairs reluctantly detaches himself from the pulse beat of commerce) and fixed the newcomer with the basilisk stare appropriate to his assumed station. Slowly he raised an interrogatory eyebrow.

By slumping unobtrusively, Diana had managed to decrease her height an apparent three inches. Her meticulously tailored

gray suit would never look frumpy, but she had removed the jacket and somehow adjusted the blouse so that it sat just a little awkwardly on her shoulders, rumpled the sleek helmet of her hair, and assumed a pair of steel-rimmed glasses that rested insecurely partway down the bridge of her aristocratic nose. "Sir, this is Coronel Obregon." Her whine, he thought, was almost over the top. "He says he talked with the young señora yesterday, sir, and she suggested he come directly to you."

Eric regarded the man before him in the manner, he hoped, of a restaurant patron who has just discovered something swimming in his soup. The newcomer was about his own age, he saw, superficially handsome in a hot-eyed, intense fashion. His expensive Italian suit was a little too tight—the automatic in his left armpit showed quite clearly—and his manner expressed the insolent self-confidence that Eric associated with the more incompetent South and Central American military.

Colonel, maybe, Eric thought. But old Che would've had you for breakfast. And you're not as sure of yourself as you make out. Already on a limb, he decided to make a leap into the dark. "Do you have a price list, Colonel, or is it a special of the day?" he barked.

The visitor blinked, suddenly less assured. "I don't understand, señor."

So far so good, Eric thought. But don't slack off now. "Nonsense," he snapped in the offensive manner of a marine supply officer he'd once worked with. "You're selling. The señora told you I was buying. Where's the merchandise?"

Obregon bared his teeth and quickly hid them again. "In a safe place, señor. Safe and . . . convenient."

An odd choice of words, Eric reflected. But of course the man was working in someone else's language. "You mean accessible?" he demanded.

The other smiled again and shrugged. "That depends, señor."

"On what?" said Eric, determined to keep boring in.

Obregon was clearly surprised by the question. "On exactly what you require, of course."

Taken off balance, Eric hesitated. From the corner of his eye he could see Diana watching both of them intently, as if sheer concentration could put her in the picture. "Then immediate delivery is out of the question," Eric said at last.

He could see Obregon now felt that control had shifted to him, and he might be right. "That depends what you mean by immediate, señor. Once cash is in my hand, perhaps two weeks."

"Two weeks? That's ridiculous," Eric said. "Didn't the señora give you our schedule?"

"Not in detail," Obregon replied with another shrug. "What is the time frame in which you work?"

"Hours rather than days," Eric replied, and seeing Obregon's startled look, continued smoothly, "And days rather than weeks. Let me say only that we cannot accept a mañana mentality."

"The *hora inglesa*," said Obregon, nodding. "I understand: I was once stationed in London. But some limitations are not possible to overcome. It is, you understand, a question of weight."

Something outside the door caught Diana's attention, and then she looked back to Eric with urgency in her eyes. "Yes, Miss Speed?" he said.

Relief, and a quick smile a man might kill for. "Excuse me, sir," she said, momentarily forgetting her whine. "I see Mr. Thomas out there, and I think I'd better snag him before he gets away."

Or before he blunders in here. "Good thinking, Miss Speed. I'll show the colonel to the elevator."

"Very pleased to meet you, *Coronel*," she said, and darted out before Obregon had a chance to reply.

"I think," said Eric, "that it would be wise to continue our discussion elsewhere. This office is far too public." He pulled

himself from the chair. "If you'll give me your card, I'll call you and set up a date."

Obregon's hand was halfway to his wallet before he pulled it back, laughing thinly. "That would be most unwise, señor."

Eric smiled. "I might find you had accidentally picked up another officer's calling cards?"

"Something of that sort. In any case, let us remember what my English friends say: 'No names, no pack drill.' "

Holding Obregon's elbow, Eric steered him out the door, careful to keep his own bulk between the colonel and Diana, who was conducting a furious sotto-voce argument with a bristling Maury Thomas some fifty feet away. "When you decide on a time and place, *Coronel*," he said easily, "why don't you call me, since you know where I am."

"That would be acceptable," Obregon replied. "The Wild-Freeman number I have."

"No need to deal with switchboard operators," Eric said. "I will give you my direct line. We want to keep this just between us."

"Then the señora who contacted me is—how do you say it?—out of the circuit?" He hesitated. "That is just as well, I think."

"Oh, really?" Eric aimed his guest into the reception area. "Mind if I ask why?"

Obregon was clearly weighing his words. As quickly as he could, Eric walked him over to the elevator bank, away from Mrs. Waldman, who was eying the two of them with open curiosity. "I do not wish to offend you, señor," he said at last.

"De nada," Eric replied. "I won't take offense: the woman is nothing to me."

"I cannot put a finger on it," Obregon said slowly. "But the señora is . . ." He groped for the word. "Unreliable? No, that is not right."

The elevator doors *whoosh*ed open. Coronel Obregon boarded, his brows still knit as he hunted for the word he

wanted. To the visible irritation of three people already inside, Eric blocked the door with one hand. "Not unreliable," he prompted.

The colonel's face cleared. "Unstable," he said. "That is it. She is unstable."

"Unstable like crazy?" Eric said as the other passengers stared.

"No, no," said Obregon. "Unstable like nitroglycerin. Sooner or later, *bang!*"

Eric walked thoughtfully into Diana's office, to find her back behind her desk, engulfing a huge and dripping sandwich with obvious pleasure. She grimaced, her mouth full, then gulped. "Well, it's not blackmail," she said.

"No, but I thought so, too—at first."

She waited for him to explain, but he was determined that she would ask for it, and finally she did: "Then what's our fake Coronel Obregon up to?"

"Fake Obregon," Eric said. "But a real colonel, unless I miss my guess."

Her eyebrows rose. "Not Spanish," she offered. "South American?"

"Or Central. Makes no difference in this case," he said.

"No, it doesn't," she said. He could almost see the wheels turning behind her blue-gray eyes. "Assuming he's in this country legally . . . ," she began, clearly thinking aloud.

"He is."

"A military man that age, with that rank," she went on, "posted to the U.S.—but not Washington . . ."

A nice distinction, he thought. You didn't learn this kind of thing in publishing.

"Either a jackass of very good family," Diana said, "or a scoundrel too well placed to dispose of. Or both."

She regarded Eric expectantly, and he felt his heart turn over. . . . "Or both," he echoed. His grin was stretching muscles he hadn't used for too long. "But I'd bet on the latter: this is a lad who left his country for his country's good."

"But what's he want with the Rajah?" she asked. "Looking to have our leader finance a revolution back home?"

"It wouldn't be the first time," said Eric. "But we're overlooking something—or someone."

"You mean *I'm* overlooking," she corrected him. "That's right: the mystery señora." She paused, considering. "Well, she could be setting up both of them—*coronel* and Rajah—for a very big, very public embarrassment."

"And so she may," he agreed. "There's still one other consideration, though." He was on the point of explaining when she waved him silent.

"Wait," she said. "Give me a chance—I'm really rusty."

You must be a holy terror when you're oiled and polished, he thought, and waited.

"Of course!" Now her eyes were gleaming. "The stream's running uphill."

"Say what?"

"The *coronel*'s the supplier, and the Rajah's the buyer." She laughed delightedly. "What would somebody like Obregon be selling?"

She knew the answer, he saw, but she wanted him to certify it. "Weapons," he said. "Obsolete small arms, jeep-mounted recoilless rifles. Maybe even an elderly armored personnel carrier—depends what Uncle Sugar's given his country in military aid."

"And that's why this situation is backward," she said, jumping in. "The Rajah doesn't buy weapons, he sells them. And if he did buy, it wouldn't be from a two-bit crook like this—"

"No, he'd call the secretary of defense, and get them for nothing," said Eric, thinking, I haven't had this much fun on the job in years.

"The woman is the key," Diana said. "We've got to find her."

"What do you mean *we*?" he said. "This is my assignment, remember?"

"And this is my shop." The smile was still on her face, but the warmth was only skin deep. "Whatever happens here is my concern."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Fair enough. Obregon's going to call me back, set up a meeting. We'll go see him together."

Suspicion hung in the air between them, and he knew he had given in too easily. "Don't try to double-cross me, Eric," she said. "I mean it."

"Who, me?" No answering smile this time. You've blown it, dummy. "You have my word."

"That's all I need," she said. "And that letter you've got in your pocket—from my unknown admirer?—I'll take it."

He was about to object, saw it would be pointless. He held out the folded page. As she accepted it, she said: "You've probably made a copy, and I won't bother asking you for it. But I'm telling you this: Forget it."

"But—"

"That's an order. This is my business, and I'll deal with it." She saw his quickly suppressed annoyance and forced a smile. "It's not important, not compared to the other thing."

It is to me, he thought as he closed the door behind him.

15. Brick

JONES BEACH; SATURDAY AFTERNOON

The east wind moaned in off the gray ocean, and Brick felt the parked car rock slightly as a gust hit it broadside. Sand and dried seaweed blew across the asphalt, and the only other living thing in sight was a seagull, fishing food wrappers out of a trash can. The beachside restaurant and locker rooms were boarded up tight, and the huge parking lot was empty.

Sitting next to him, behind the wheel, Magdalen shifted to look at herself again in the rearview mirror. She had tinted her hair a dull, dark brown and mascara'd her eyebrows until they were almost a solid bar. Her makeup, which emphasized the strength of her jaw and hardened the planes of her cheekbones, changed her appearance entirely. In her old navy pea jacket and blue watch cap she looked, Brick thought, entirely sexless and tough enough to spit bullets.

For the third time in ten minutes she glanced at her watch, but they were still early. "I hope this Ballard guy's not going to be another loser like that Mexican bandit you dug up Thursday," she said.

"Old Obregon's no Mexican, and he's not a bandit," Brick objected, knowing it made no difference. "He's from Colombia, and he's regular army—Colombian army, anyway. I used to sell him lots of stuff, and he never welshed on a deal."

"This is a little different from stolen jeep tires or radio parts or whatever it was," she said, her contempt unhidden.

He wanted to say "You wanted to meet him, so why are you dumping on me?" But what came out was a grumbly, "I just don't see why you took against him like that."

"I didn't trust him. And that's enough."

He knew Magdalen was telling him to drop it, but he wanted—he needed—her to know where he was coming from. "That's easy for you to say, but it's me Obregon's going to be pissed at: I was the one talked him into the meeting, made it sound like a big deal, all for nothing."

She smiled, but not at him. "I wouldn't worry, Brick. I gave him something to chew on."

"Yeah," he said. "And about that . . ."

She turned on him, her green eyes glittering with cold anger. "Well?"

All at once Brick remembered he wasn't supposed to know, wasn't supposed to have seen the scrap of paper she'd given to Obregon. "Nothing," he muttered.

The Colombian had chosen the dusty little Indian restaurant, with the smell of curry soaked into the fringed curtains and fake palms in buckets between the tables. There were no other customers at that early hour, and the waiter was in the middle of his own dinner at a table in back. At the start, Obregon acted as if Magdalen weren't there, talking to Brick right across her, which of course bent her totally out of shape. And then when he finally got the picture, he overdid it in the other direction—called her "señora" every other word and locked those bedroom eyes on her as if she were the only person in the world, let alone the room. Brick could tell Obregon still wasn't taking her seriously, though. The one thing guaranteed to make Magdalen totally crazy.

The atmosphere had got so tense, with Obregon pouring it on and Magdalen bristling silently, that Brick finally fled to the men's room. He took a leak and washed his hands three times, hearing the voices from the dining room but not able to make out the words. He was hidden by the fake palms as he came out, so they didn't see him. Obregon was standing, obviously getting ready to leave, but not looking angry, which surprised and relieved Brick.

Magdalen had an idiot simper on her face and her lashes were actually fluttering, as if she were doing a send-up of Scarlett O'Hara. She was holding out a triangle of paper—it looked like a corner torn off the menu—on which she had scribbled a few words. Brick couldn't read them from where he stood, but Obregon saved him the trouble, pronouncing the name and address carefully.

"That's right, Colonel," Magdalen said. "You just go right up there tomorrow, around ten-thirty, and he'll be expecting you."

Why had she done it? Brick had asked himself—was still asking himself. Several times he'd almost asked Magdalen, but each time something warned him, in the strongest terms, to keep this small chunk of information to himself.

Not that he was planning to double-cross Magdalen or anything. Hell, he loved her more than any other woman he'd ever known, even if she did sometimes frighten him. But ever since . . . what she'd done to the old goat from Washington, Brick knew he needed to have an ace up his sleeve, just in case, and the name and address on that piece of paper was as close to an ace as he could come.

* * *

Beside him, Magdalen stiffened. "This the guy?" she asked.

It had to be, Brick thought—what else would a delivery truck, a repainted post office step van, be doing in a Jones Beach parking lot this time of year? The van made a slow circuit of the empty lot, finally pulling in right behind Magdalen's rented Toyota econobox, blocking it against the curb.

The sun bounced off the van's dirty windshield, hiding the driver and whoever else might be inside.

Without warning, a wave of blind panic swept over Brick, and his stomach clenched tight. It's not Kenny after all. It's the cops, or the FBI, coming after Magdalen. The van's door slid back, and a tall figure in jeans and a sheepskin coat stepped carefully down to the pavement. He was holding both his empty hands away from his sides, and Brick drew a long, shuddering breath.

"Well, is that your friend?" Magdalen asked again, more insistent this time.

"I think so," Brick said slowly. He was the right height for Kenny, but his coat collar was turned up, and he was wearing a wide-brimmed grungy bush hat and a pair of reflecting sunglasses with oversize lenses.

"Oh, for God's sake," Magdalen said, and hopped out of the Toyota. "Are you Kenny Ballard?" she called across the top of the car.

"Depends who's asking." The sunglasses came off, and it was Kenny all right, but different somehow. His skin, which had been the kind of shiny brownish red that reminded Brick of really expensive cordovan, was clay colored and lifeless, pulled tight over his cheekbones.

Wondering, apprehensive, Brick opened the car door and hoisted himself out. "Hey, Kendo, how're they . . . ," he began, and ran dry. My God, his face is like a skull.

"Hangin'?" said Kenny. "Still operative, last time I checked." He looked Brick up and down, taking his time the way he always had. "I see showbiz agrees with you." He swung his head, slow and gentle as if his neck hurt, to face Magdalen. "You must be the woman's got old Harley pussy-whipped."

"Jeez, Kenny, give me a break," Brick protested. I was crazy to set this up, the two people in the world who always had the drop on me.

Magdalen was considering Kenny, her head cocked to one side. Suddenly she smiled at him the way only she could—a

totally unexpected blaze of delight that transformed her face—and Kenny's dull eyes, black pebbles, came to life. Without looking at Brick, he ordered, "Introduce us, Harley."

In his confusion he stumbled: "Kenny, this is, uh, Mary. Uh, Mary Tolliver." But who the hell is Mary Tolliver, anyway? He'd heard the name for the first time this morning, when Magdalen had used it to rent the car—and backed it up, he reminded himself, with a driver's license and credit card. On the drive out to Jones Beach, weaving down the Belt Parkway at her usual sixty-five miles an hour, she'd told him to use the name with Kenny, too. And had told him to shut up when he'd asked her where it came from.

The ghost of a smile whisked across Kenny's gaunt face. "Pleased to meet you, uh Mary."

"The pleasure's mine," she said. Her expression of secret amusement somehow embraced Kenny, as it shut Brick out. "Shall we get down to business?"

"Step into my office," Kenny replied, gesturing toward the back of the van.

Inside it was bare but clean, lit by the sun, which found its way through a skylight inset into the roof. Cheap folding furniture was secured to the sides with heavy bungee cords. Slowly, as if each movement were calculated for minimum exertion, Kenny unstrapped three chairs and a small table and set them up.

"You all right, Kenny?" Brick asked.

"Not really." And to Magdalen: "Have a seat, uh Mary."

"Thank you." In spite of the makeup and the clothes, she seemed to Brick completely feminine now. He had seen her pull this trick before, impose a new personality on her own. But never so quickly or so completely.

Kenny lowered himself onto the second chair. "Harley told me you're making a movie—sorry, a *film*." His grin had a little malice behind it, but then it always did. "He told me you need a technical adviser." He spoke the last two words syllable by syllable, as if they were a foreign language. And as if they were some kind of private joke.

She leaned forward, suddenly all business. "That's right. It's a story set in the peacetime U.S. Army, and the plot is based on an event in Brick's career."

"Brick who?" said Kenny, looking puzzled. Magdalen said nothing, but her eyes went quickly to Brick and then back to Kenny's face, which reflected first disbelief and then delighted malevolence. "No shit?" he said. "Brick *Wahl*?" He rocked back, and the chair creaked dangerously. "Brick goddamn Wahl. I love it." Brick could see laughter welling up in the other man, and it exploded in a creaking guffaw, followed instantly by a desperate, whooping intake of breath. Kenny's face was a dreadful purple, his arms wrapped tight around his rib cage as if he were holding his chest together.

"What is it?" Brick heard himself cry. "Jesus, Kenny, what's the matter?"

The other man was trying to say something, but all that emerged were awful, spongy gasps. At last he managed to expel one word—"Medicine!"—and two breaths later a second: "Glove!"

Magdalen got it first, of course, and scrambled to the front of the van, knocking her chair to the floor. She returned clutching a bottle half full of dark green liquid. "How much?" she asked, but Kenny grabbed it from her, twisted off the cap, and swallowed a long slug.

The effect was miraculous: in seconds Kenny's breathing was nearly normal, and the tide of blood began to ebb from his cheeks, though it was nearly a minute before he straightened up and rasped to Magdalen, "The name: your idea, right?"

She smiled her cat's smile, and he said, his voice still harsh and thin, "Brick Wahl. That's truly beautiful." He considered Brick, as if seeing him for the first time, shook his head, then turned back to Magdalen. "So what's the event in Harley's—sorry, Brick's—career that's worth a movie?"

But Brick could see from Kenny's face that he knew, and so could Magdalen, who said only, "You were there, I think."

"By God," Kenny whispered. "Was I ever." He wrapped his

arms back around his torso, rocked back and forth in the chair as if the motion could keep him from laughing again. "Harley's revenge," he said, more to himself than to them. "Well, why the hell not?" He shook his head one more time and addressed Magdalen: "Okay. Now what do you want from me?"

* * *

As Magdalen explained, Kenny slumped on the folding chair, staring vacantly up at the skylight. Brick knew he was taking it all in, though, and when she stopped he looked her in the eye and said, drawling out the words, "Well, well, well."

"What's the problem?" she asked, her eyes narrowing. "Brick said you could get the equipment we need."

Kenny dismissed it with a wave. "No sweat. It's what you *don't* need that's interesting."

Magdalen was suddenly very still, as if she had somehow recoiled into herself. "What d'you mean?" she said.

Kenny's smile made his face look more like a skull than ever. "Oh, like trucks," he said. "And tent flies, and uniforms, and M-16's. All that army stuff."

He was mocking her, Brick could see, but in a strangely gentle way. Magdalen, instead of exploding, said quietly, "We have other sources for that." And matched Kenny's slow smile.

"Of course you do," said Kenny. "So all you want from me is the tube."

"And the shells, or whatever they're called," she said.

"Right." He seemed to turn her words over in his head for several seconds before he said, "Practice rounds should do you. When you film the scene where the mess tent gets taken out, you'll want preset charges, in the ground. To make sure"—he paused—"that nobody gets hurt."

"Kenny," she said, her voice a caress, "I have to tell you that making sure nobody gets hurt is not my first priority."

"Is that so?" he said.

"And I'm changing the original incident a little—for dramatic emphasis, you understand."

"Dramatic emphasis," Kenny echoed. "That's nice."

What the hell's going on? Brick asked himself. It's like they're having two conversations at once, and only one's in words. A stab of jealousy took him by surprise, and he knew it must have showed on his face, because Magdalen reached out and patted his arm.

But her attention was still on Kenny. She said, "A building, I thought—instead of just a tent. Quite a large building."

Kenny's dark eyes were glittering. "Lot of people inside?" he said.

Her eyes were locked on his. "A lot."

Kenny rocked back on his chair, looked up at the skylight as he thought out loud: "Remember those big barracks down at Dix, Harley?" he asked. "The new ones? Concrete, they were. Three, four stories high, with the mess hall built in."

"What? Oh, sure," said Brick, thinking, She never said anything about buildings. What is this?

But Kenny had turned back to Magdalen: "Something like that, uh Mary?"

"More or less," she said a little impatiently. "We can be more specific later."

"No, we can't," Kenny replied. "I mean, the building dictates the weapon, if you follow me."

Magdalen's folding chair creaked as she leaned forward, eyes bright and intent. "Not quite," she said.

Kenny was enjoying himself, that much was clear. He made a church steeple of his two hands, the way he always did before he explained something. "Maybe it'd help," he said to Magdalen, "if you told me exactly what you want to do." She stiffened, and he added quickly, "I mean, what effect you're looking for."

"Yes," she said. Brick could see she was working it out as she spoke: "Okay. I see this big room—really huge room—and it's full of men. All of a sudden, without any warning . . ."

16. Magdalen

As she addressed Kenny Ballard, a small piece of her attention was still tuned to Brick: she sensed, with annoyance, the confusion, jealousy, and fear that were sweeping him. But she couldn't bother herself with Brick's shortcomings. Just sit there and look pretty, she wanted to tell him. I'm talking to a grown-up.

She had to focus on making Kenny understand exactly what she wanted from him—while concealing from him what she meant to do.

Or did she? Her instinct was telling her that this was a man who didn't give a damn, who might fall in with her plan, never mind its craziness, just because the idea of it appealed to him. In Kenny she sensed a spirit energized by hatred, with nothing to lose. A person coming from the same place she herself was. Don't count on it, she warned herself. Not yet. Still, she was sure that his pose of lazy amusement was just that, a pose. She could feel him absorbing what she was saying (and, she suspected, a good deal of what she was leaving unsaid).

When she finished he sat silent for a couple of minutes,

looking up through the skylight at the clouds racing across the blue. Still without speaking, he undid the second button of his greasy sheepskin coat and reached inside, pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. After shaking one free, he lit it with a kitchen match he produced from a side pocket and struck, with the ease of long habit, on the chair frame. He inhaled a shallow, cautious puff and then a longer one.

"Okay," he said, "I think I get the situation." His half smile came and went so fast, she wasn't sure if she'd actually seen it, and his gaunt, clay-colored face was expressionless as he continued: "You want this shell or whatever to come down with no warning, right through the roof, and explode in the middle of these guys. Take 'em all out at once."

"Exactly," she said.

Kenny shook his head. "Well, that's a problem—right, Harley?"

Brick started to agree, incoherently, but she cut him short: "Shut up, sweetheart. Let Kenny explain this."

Kenny's dark eyes went first to Brick, who shrugged angrily, and then back to Magdalen. "Artillery lesson," he said. She nodded encouragement, and he went on: "When our old buddy here dropped one in the officers mess, he used a mortar because that was what he had. Happens it was the perfect weapon for the job."

"Perfect how?" said Magdalen.

Kenny's hand sketched a steep upward curve and an equally steep descent. "That's how a mortar shell flies, and that's why it's used for shooting at blocked targets—behind a hill, say, or hidden by trees, like the tent fly ol' Harley was aiming at."

"But what's—"

"The problem," Kenny continued, holding up his finger to stop her, "is that the only mortars left, these days, are what the army calls company weapons; most of 'em are light enough for a couple guys to hump into position. They fire a small shell, and they're not real accurate. If that roof you're aiming at is pretty thick . . ."

He paused, and she said, "Assume it is."

"Well, it'd take two or three rounds just to blow a hole through . . . maybe a minute in time. By then the people inside, if they've got any brains at all, they're out the door, screaming for your scalp."

"He's right, Magdalen," Brick said earnestly. "I don't think this is such a great idea after all."

She waved him quiet, and Kenny went on: "A real artillery piece has a flat trajectory, like a rifle, and then there's a kind of gun called a howitzer that's like partway in between. If what you need is high-angle fire and a big shell, a howitzer's your baby. But"—he grinned at her, a death's-head smile—"a howitzer's kind of large to put in your pocket and walk out with. Besides, you need a crew and a truck just to turn it around."

She was shaking her head, but he went on, seemingly gripped by his own train of thought: "Then there's a recoilless rifle. Hundred-and-five-millimeter shell." He made a circle with his big, splay-fingered hands: "About that big around. Comes mounted on a small vehicle—quarter-ton truck in the old days, humvee now. Nice flat trajectory, so you can shoot right through a window. Don't have to worry about punchin' holes in roofs."

Maybe, she thought. "Does it have to be attached to a truck?"

He laughed. "Lord, no. Vehicle mount just gives it mobility. Hell, you could mount the tripod on a good, strong table." He pulled himself up. "Wait one. I was forgetting: a recoilless rifle's pretty much line of sight, and your story kind of calls for a high angle of fire."

"What's 'line of sight' mean?" she demanded.

"What it sounds like," he replied. "You see the target. And the target can see you—see who's shooting at them."

"Oh." Was he just toying with her, amusing himself? Or was he trying to find out what she needed without committing himself? Or maybe a little of both? "No," she said. "High angle is what I want. So it comes right out of the blue."

"Like it's from the Lord God Jehovah," said Kenny. Their eyes met, and Magdalen thought, He knows. Not the details, but he knows.

"You said the army uses small mortars today," she said slowly. "Did they use to have larger ones?"

"Oh, sure," he said. "Back in the Civil War, the Union had one so big it had to travel on a flatbed railroad car. Most armies still had a few big ones till a few years ago."

A few years ago, she thought. Damn.

Kenny squeezed the burning ember from the end of his cigarette and ground it out on the van's floor. As he methodically shredded the rest of the butt, he said, "Let's try it from a different angle. You want to take out a bunch of guys in a big old room, right?" She nodded. "So how many guys we talking about? Twenty? Fifty?"

Here goes nothing, she thought, and said as evenly as she could, "Five hundred and forty-six."

Brick's jaw dropped, and he goggled like a fish on ice, but Kenny merely repeated the number, smiling again: "Five hundred and forty-six. That's a lot of men."

He wasn't taking her seriously, she saw, but she corrected herself anyway: "Actually, it'd probably be more like seven hundred."

Kenny's smile widened, broke into a tolerant chuckle. "Hey, give us a break, honey. If you want to zap that many guys all at once, you'll have to nuke 'em."

Brick guffawed loudly. She leveled a cold stare at him, and the laughter trailed off into suppressed giggles. Turning back to Kenny, she said, "I'm sure that would be best. But I was wondering if poison gas might not do the trick."

Kenny opened his mouth and then shut it. "Well," he said slowly, "why the hell not?"

Brick was clearly too stunned to do more than stare as Kenny went on, apparently thinking aloud: "I mean, for a movie." His eyes flicked to Magdalen and away. "Of course, we still

have to bust open that roof, but if we can work that out, the rest is so goddamn simple."

"Simple?" Brick objected. "What the hell you talking about, Kenny?"

"I mean simple like you," Kenny snapped. "Which is dead-ass simple." To Magdalen: "Okay, you've opened up the roof, never mind how, and this second round comes down. There's this little plop, which probably nobody even hears, because they're all yelling and flopping around, and this white smoke comes hissing out. Everybody starts twitching and choking, maybe upchucking, and then they start to fall down. Dead." His wide-lipped mouth smiled at her, but his eyes were coldly watchful. "How's that for your"—half a beat—"movie?"

"Is that the way it'd be?" she asked. "Really?"

He shrugged. "Close enough. As I recall, nerve gas—which is what we're talking about here—doesn't have any color, but you want something for your audience to see, right?"

"Hey, that's not so bad," said Brick, brightening visibly. " 'Course, nobody ever put nerve gas in mortar rounds, but who's going to know that?"

"That's right, Harley," said Kenny, but his eyes were locked on Magdalen's. "The U.S. of A. never issued a nerve-gas round for mortars."

Her trained ear picked up the slight stress on *issued*, and she looked a question at Kenny, who shook his head almost imperceptibly.

I've got to get him alone, Magdalen thought, but it was impossible to concentrate with Brick burbling next to her: "Jeez, it might just fly, Magdalen. Kenny and I could help you with the script, you know—the technical stuff, anyway. We couldn't use your name in the credits, of course. Not for a while, at least. . . ."

"Calls for a drink," Kenny said suddenly, and Magdalen jumped on the cue.

"It certainly does," she said. "And I'll buy. But where can we go?"

"I know a nice little bar on the mainland," Kenny said. "You can follow me."

"Brick can follow us," Magdalen corrected. "I'll ride with you, Kenny."

* * *

The ex–post office van lacked a passenger seat, and Magdalen found herself perched, precariously cross-legged, on a metal shelf across from Kenny. He was silent until they were on the Cross Island Parkway, his eyes on the outside rearview mirror, but a sort of wordless communication seemed to flow between them. "One thing about a guy like ol' Harley," Kenny said without preamble, "is that he's not quite as dumb as you get used to. Every once in a while he fools you."

"I know," she said, startled at how perfectly his words had dovetailed into her thought.

"And the other thing," he continued, "is that he's a total yellow-belly."

"A coward, yes," she agreed. "You get used to it."

"No, I mean *total*," said Kenny. "There's nothing he's not scared of." He glanced at the outside mirror and said: "Jealous, too. That's a dangerous combination."

He was right, she knew, but there were more important things to talk about. "I'll handle Harley," she said. "Tell me about nerve gas."

17. Diana

WILD-FREEMAN; MONDAY AFTERNOON

The newly installed extension phone on Diana's desk buzzed softly. She set down her pencil, forced herself to wait for the second ring before lifting the handset. "Yes?" she said.

"I want to speak to Mr. Channing," said a familiar, accented voice.

"He's not available at the moment, *Coronel*," she said. "But he told me to set up the appointment for him."

* * *

"Let me get this straight," said Eric. "You jiggered my phone so all the calls to my extension come through your line?"

"That's what I said." From the look on his face, Diana decided there was no point in telling him his outgoing line was tapped, too.

"Might I ask why?"

When he's angry, his voice gets quieter, she thought. But those white spots on his cheeks give him away. "Maybe I

wanted to make sure you didn't forget to tell me when that so-called colonel called you back."

He didn't bat an eye, but she knew she had scored. She gave him a benign smile, and after a moment his tightly compressed lips twitched in response. "All right," he said. "But Obregon's a real colonel, even if his name isn't Obregon. He's Colombian army, attached to their U.N. Mission."

"Nice detective work," she said. "In what capacity?"

"That's a little obscure," Eric replied. "Officially, he's a cultural attaché, but all he seems to do is collect parking tickets. Probably just another no-goodnick Bogotá would rather exile than court-martial."

"And unofficially?"

"Under-the-table equipment sales," Eric said "Pretty much anything you want to buy, and I'm still betting it's weapons this time."

"You may be right," she said. "Let's find out."

* * *

Diana's doorbell rang ten minutes before the agreed-on time; she cursed under her breath as she pulled on a robe and buzzed open the front door. Eric came bounding up the carpeted stairs, taking them two at a time. Perhaps as a concession to the raw chill outside, he had added a vest to his hairy tweed suit. If he had a weapon, it didn't show.

"Sorry I'm early," he said cheerfully, and then, "What've you done to your face?"

"I'm still doing it," she said, holding open the apartment door. He brought the outdoors chill with him and a smell of soap and pipe tobacco. I didn't know he smoked, she thought. She pointed down the narrow hallway to the living room that faced 50th Street. "Make yourself at home," she said. "I'll be five minutes."

In her bedroom, at the back of the apartment, she stood before the full-length mirror and considered her appearance.

The dress, bought on the run at a Lexington Avenue thrift shop, was in its way perfect: too tight, especially behind; too complicated—all flounces and bows; and a color that reminded Diana of spoiled tunafish. The kind of dress, in her view, that a man with little taste would buy for his mistress with none.

To complement the excessive eye makeup she was already wearing, she laid on a mouth that startled even her, dusted her cheeks an unbecoming angry pink, and stepped back to get the full picture. Even fluffed up, the hair's too short, she thought. But Obregon already saw it that way. Besides—she swung around for the side view—it's the rear that'll catch his eye.

A quick glance inside her shoulder bag to make sure the stun gun was there, and she strode down the hallway. The suppressed thought that had been squirming its way upward into her consciousness popped free just as she entered the living room: The first guy I've let in here since Troubridge, and I look like a madam from Scarsdale.

Eric was standing just back from the window and to one side, looking out into the street below. He turned as she came in, blinked twice, then grinned.

"Your faithful but déclassé assistant," she said. "What do you think?"

"Awful," he replied. His eyes went to the hem of her skirt, tight across her thighs. "I hope to hell we don't have to run for it."

"You run," she said. "I'll cover your retreat."

"Why doesn't that come as a surprise?" He wanted to say something quite different, she saw, but he was suppressing it. Well, he was learning.

* * *

"You sure this is the place?" he said. "Looks closed to me."

So it did, the neon sign in the window dark and only a single overhead bulb to push back the shadows that hid the

edges of the big, low-ceilinged dining room. But there was no question in her mind. "This is it," she said. "Right day; right time."

Eric pursed his lips. "Cafe Vallarta," he read aloud. *"Cocina Mexicana."* He was just vamping, she saw: his eyes surveyed the nearly empty street—every doorway, every parked car.

"You think it's a trap," she said.

"Yes," he replied absently as he tested the door handle. The door swung inward without a sound, and he stepped in.

"Then what the hell are you doing?" she demanded.

"There's one way to find out," he said, his voice not quite a whisper. "That was what you wanted, I think."

"I'd be happy to take it as read," she muttered as she followed him in.

Inside, with the light coming from the street, she could see a little more detail. The square tables were set for dinner, silver and napkins laid out, water glasses upended. One table near the door but not directly visible from the street was somehow different from the rest. A second look and she saw that on this one, three of the glasses were right side up, filled with water and ice cubes.

She touched Eric's arm, nodded to the table. Before he could say anything, a voice boomed out of the shadows at the back of the restaurant. "Please, Señor Channing, have a seat. And you, too, señorita."

Was that just the slightest emphasis on *Channing?* Diana's eyes met Eric's, and the trace of a whisper reached her ear: "Blown."

Over Eric's shoulder, something stirred in the shadows. She heard a movement behind the cashier's stand by the entrance. Cut off, she thought. But one of us could probably make it to the street.

"Sit, señor," said the voice in the shadows.

Eric's shrug was almost imperceptible. He pulled out the chair nearest him and dropped onto it. "I understand the *estofado* is usually reliable here," he said.

Diana lowered herself onto the chair on his right. "I don't much care for braised beef," she said. As she spoke, she slipped the flat plastic rectangle of the stun gun from her purse and pushed it up the left sleeve of her dress, where the elastic cuff held it in place on the inside of her wrist.

"Hands on the table," said a new voice from immediately behind Diana. Eric complied, and after a moment's hesitation, so did she, palms carefully down. A figure moved out of the darkness and bent over Eric. For a second Diana's breath caught in her throat, and then she realized the man was just patting Eric down. He did it thoroughly, she saw, not missing the ankles or the spot at the small of the back.

"Nada," said the man, straightening up. He stepped behind Diana, and she gritted her teeth, knowing what was coming.

His hands lingered on her breasts, as she knew they would, glided down her sides to her hips, and explored the flounces and ruffles. She could feel his cheek against her back as his arms encircled her, and his hands pushed her thighs apart. He was breathing faster as his groping hands tried to work her skirt higher.

Every instinct urged her to fight him, to pull the stun gun from her sleeve and zap him to the floor. But in memory's ear she heard again the softly pedantic voice of Dr. Fasolt. "Let them have their little fun," the old man had said. "Once they forget what they are supposed to be doing, then you have won."

Easy for you to say, she'd thought at the time, and she thought it again now—but let the searcher's hands (long fingernails: yuck) stroke upward. Eric drew a shuddering breath; the sound steadied her. At last the first speaker, still invisible, snapped *"¡Basta!"* and her tormentor reluctantly rocked back on his heels, gave her ankles a cursory slap, and rose.

"The purse, imbecile," said the first speaker. The searcher, muttering under his breath, spilled its contents across the table, stirred the heap—keys, wallet, lipstick, notepad, loose change—with his forefinger. At last he straightened up and stepped back.

"That's better. Now we can discuss a little." The speaker stepped into the light. A squat fireplug of a man, Diana saw, with a square, slightly pockmarked face. He was wearing a topcoat, under which she caught a glimpse of white shirt, conservative patterned tie, and dark suit. "Perhaps we begin with your name, señor," he continued, taking the seat across from Eric.

"I don't see why," Eric said pleasantly. "We just came here for dinner."

"No, you came to see Colonel Obregon," the fireplug corrected. "But he, finding himself over his depth, has turned to me. You may call me Mr. Sanchez."

You, however, are seldom out of your depth, Diana thought. But why are you here at all?

"I don't really want to call you anything," Eric said. "My business is with the *coronel*."

Mr. Sanchez sighed. "I hate these boring preliminaries," he said. "I will lay all my cards on the table, and then you will do the same. Thus, we will save a great deal of time."

"I'm willing to listen," Eric replied.

Mr. Sanchez took a long, slow swallow from the glass of water in front of him. He kept his eyes fixed on Eric as he drank. In the shadows behind Eric, the searcher with the inquiring fingers stood quietly, hands at his sides. The presumptive third man, behind the cashier's desk, still had not shown himself. Diana had the sense that the two men she could see had put her out of their minds as a mere female—and that, for the moment, was just fine with her.

"Here is the situation," said Mr. Sanchez. "My colleague, Colonel Obregon, is contacted by a person with whom he had done business in the past. This person indicates that he has new, important business to discuss." Mr. Sanchez wrinkled his square face into an expression of embarrassment as he continued: "Colonel Obregon, I must confess, is sometimes precipitous in his reactions. He should have spoken with me before making the appointment. He did not."

Eric nodded judiciously, as if the story made perfect sense to him, but said nothing.

"The colonel," Mr. Sanchez went on, "attends the meeting, where there is a third party, a woman." For the first time he appeared to notice Diana, threw her a humorless smile, then turned back to Eric. "The woman was in charge, Obregon says, but she did not do business. Instead, she referred him to Mr. Channing, at the address on Fifth Avenue. She said that he—Mr. Channing—would put the proposition to Colonel Obregon."

"I see," said Eric.

"When the colonel returned to . . . When the colonel returned, I questioned him," said Mr. Sanchez. "I then took the obvious precaution: I secured a periodical in which there was a photograph of Mr. Channing and showed it to the fool Obregon."

"Oh, not a complete fool," said Eric. "Colonel Obregon's contact was an old friend, of course."

"Yes—or so he seemed." Suddenly the room was coldly hostile. Mr. Sanchez glanced quickly past Eric, and the second man tensed. Diana risked a glance down at the table: the fingers of her right hand were within an inch or two of her left wrist.

"You think this is a setup," said Eric. "A trap for Colonel Obregon."

"What else would it be?" Mr. Sanchez replied coolly. Diana saw, over Eric's shoulder, the look of amused superiority on the searcher's face. "You are, as it happens, too late. Colonel Obregon is no longer available."

"What does that mean?" Eric asked.

"It means that he has embarrassed his country once too often," Mr. Sanchez replied. "So it does not matter if you are ATF or DEA or FBI or someone who really does want to do business with Obregon: you can forget it."

"Then we have nothing further to discuss," said Eric, pushing his chair back.

"On the contrary," Mr. Sanchez said. "We come full circle, back to my first question: Who are you, and whom do you represent?"

The fingertips of Diana's right hand were just touching the butt of the stun gun. If push came to shove, she was confident she could put Mr. Sanchez on the floor before he knew what had hit him. The other two men were the problem: even if Eric could handle the one who stood behind him, there remained the third, hidden behind the cashier's desk and armed with God knew what.

"Well," Eric said with a rueful chuckle, "That's a little hard to explain." He had sagged back on his chair, his palms on the edge of the table, legs extended under it. Unless he was an acrobat, Diana thought, there was no offensive move he could make from that position. The man behind him clearly thought so, too: she saw the tension go out of him, his hands fall back to his sides.

"Try me," Mr. Sanchez said, smiling. "Tell me why I should not gain credit with your FBI and tell them you have attempted to buy a military weapon from a Colombian citizen."

Wonderful, Diana thought. The Rajah's going to love this.

Eric's eyebrows shot upward. "I? How do you figure that?" Even to Diana's experienced eye, he looked genuinely surprised.

"Then you deny a connection to Roger Channing?" Mr. Sanchez demanded, leaning forward across the table. "To the woman who accompanied the man Wall?"

Eric picked up Mr. Sanchez's meaning an instant before Diana did: "I don't know anybody named Wall," he said blandly. "I suppose you're going to tell me the woman was named Thisbe."

"It is entirely real," Mr. Sanchez replied. "Harley Wahl—W, A, H, L. The woman did not give her name. As I expect you already know."

"Too bad," Eric said. "The woman is why we are here."

Mr. Sanchez eyed Eric thoughtfully. "How so?"

"My name is Szabo—which will mean nothing to you," Eric said. "I and the lady here are indeed employed by Roger Channing. . . ."

"A name," Mr. Sanchez put in, "which means a great deal. More than a Walton, as much as a Perot. Can you prove it?"

"Not quickly enough to make any difference," Eric replied, dismissing the question. "A gentleman as well informed as you will know that Mr. Channing takes great pains to insulate himself from the world." He smiled, one worldly man to another, but Mr. Sanchez did not respond. "I could give you a number to telephone, but of course it is unlisted."

"Then it appears we have an impasse," said Mr. Sanchez. His eyes flicked to his associate, who took a half step forward.

Diana tensed, her fingers plucking at the stun gun. Eric was looking straight at her, and she saw, or thought she saw, his head shake "no." She froze as he said, "Wait."

Mr. Sanchez made a small gesture that brought his associate up short. "Well?"

"Mr. Channing shares many interests with your nation," said Eric. "I think your government would not want to offend or hinder him, in a private matter."

"Perhaps not," Mr. Sanchez said, sitting back on his chair. "If I was sure—"

"That I speak for Mr. Channing, and that this is a private affair," said Eric. "For the first, I can't prove anything. For the second, I can say only that the woman we are looking for feels she has been injured by Mr. Channing. She has some childish scheme to embarrass him publicly. That was why she sent Colonel Obregon to Mr. Channing's office."

Diana could feel Mr. Sanchez wavering. He began to say something, but Eric rode right over it.

"Consider, Mr. Sanchez: What could Roger Channing buy from Colonel Obregon that he could not obtain more quickly and safely elsewhere?"

"You have a point," Mr. Sanchez said slowly. "But still—"

"And if Roger Channing wanted something from Colom-

bia," Eric continued, "he would simply call Señor Eladio Gomez directly. I believe the number is 333–4359."

Mr. Sanchez's dark eyes widened. "You are very well informed." And after a long moment: "What exactly do you wish to know?"

* * *

"Very smooth, Eric," said Diana, settling back in the taxi. "A very cool performance." Her heartbeat had long since settled back to normal, and her stomach was beginning to unknot itself at last.

"Well, I don't mind saying you scared the daylights out of me," he said.

"Little *moi*? However so?"

"I was afraid you were going to blow Sanchez away before I had a chance to reorient him," Eric replied, sounding grumpy. "What was it up your sleeve, anyway—Mace?"

"This." She took the stun gun from her purse and handed it to him.

"Oh, grand," he replied, turning the gray plastic oblong over in his hands. "These are illegal, you know."

"Don't give me illegal," she said, taking the gun from him. After a moment she laughed; it sounded a little shaky, and she bit it off. "I might just have fried him, too, except for the other two."

"What other two?" He sounded completely mystified.

"The one behind you—I figured you could probably handle him. . . ."

"Thanks."

"But the other guy, hiding behind the cashier's desk. Come to think of it, I never did see . . . What're you laughing at?"

"You," he sputtered. She waited, caught between annoyance and the surprising urge to laugh, too. Finally he said, "That 'other guy' wasn't with Sanchez at all. I think he must work at the restaurant."

He was having her on, but she found she didn't mind feeding him the line: "What do you mean?"

"Well, sweetheart, that other guy was the biggest, fattest tomcat I've seen in a hell of a while."

"Oh." Now she really wanted to laugh but suspected that once started she might not be able to stop. "Well, you certainly let the air out of Sanchez. What was that number you dropped on him? The one that began 333? And who's Eladio Gomez?"

"Eladio Gomez is the Colombian chief of national security. The number is his private line, in Bogotá. A friend of mine dug it up for me this afternoon."

"And if Sanchez had called?"

"God knows." In the flash of passing headlights she saw the amusement on his face. And the fatigue. "If the Rajah has any interests in Colombia, he hasn't told me about them."

Very well done indeed, she thought. I underestimated you, Eric Szabo. "One other question," she said.

"Not unless you ask it over dinner."

Too soon. But not by much. "A working dinner," she said. "And a quick one."

She could feel his irritation, hear it in his voice: "Why a quick one?"

"So we can track down Harley Wahl and his mysterious lady boss," she replied.

18. Brick

LAWRENCE RESIDENTIAL HOTEL; MONDAY EVENING

On the TV screen the tag-team match was reaching a pitch of screaming frenzy, but he was barely aware of it. Usually the huge, fat, roaring performers in their weird outfits soothed his spirit; sometimes Brick wished he'd become a wrestler instead of an actor.

Tonight, though, he couldn't get Magdalen out of his head. What the goddamn hell is she up to? he asked himself, and then: I should never have brought Kenny into this.

Ever since their meeting with Kenny Ballard two days ago, Magdalen had been high as a kite—but not in a way Brick had ever seen before. Not giggly, the way she got with champagne; or violent, which was what coke did to her. It was a little like her manner on opening nights, only a hundred times more intense: her green eyes glittered, she looked ten years younger, she seemed to vibrate with energy. Like an engine that had been idling in neutral and was suddenly slammed into gear, with the throttle pushed hard against the firewall.

And not just thrashing around, either. Hers was a directed

energy: Magdalen Tyrrell knew where she was going. The trouble was, she was going alone. Or—even worse—with Kenny. But one thing Brick was sure of: in Magdalen's life, Brick Wahl was history.

Without warning, an awful thought crashed down on him: She was planning to bail out and stick him with Fielding's murder. All it would take was one phone call. The NYPD, at least, would snap at any way of closing the case before the feds stole it from them. . . . And so what if they had no evidence? A little accident in the back of the squad car, and no one would ever know. Lee Harvey Wahl. Brick Oswald.

It took an almost physical effort to pull himself back from the brink of panic, but at last his conscious mind was able to convince his gut that Magdalen simply wouldn't bother selling him out. Hard as it was to believe, she had put Fielding right out of her head, as if breaking a U.S. congressman's neck (he could form the thought now) was no bigger a deal than killing a chicken.

She'd shown him that on Sunday evening, when she'd come back to the apartment (after a day doing Christ knew what) just in time for the follow-up story on Fielding's murder—the last item on the late news.

It was the first time in three days that the dead congressman had been mentioned on TV, and even Brick, jumpy as he was, could tell the case was stalled. Nothing about new evidence or new witnesses or even new leads, just a woman PR type from the New York police, reading a statement that said another bunch of experts had been called in from Washington to work on the case.

Magdalen listened, stuck out her tongue at the screen, and laughed. It made Brick want to shake her: how could she think the feds were going to drop the hunt just because it had fallen out of the headlines? But Fielding was a forbidden subject for them—Brick knew it, without knowing exactly how it had happened. There was nothing he could say, and the

silence between them only hardened when at last they unfolded the bed and crawled into it.

Then this morning her lawyer had called. No wise-ass remarks this time. Shelly the shyster sounded as if he were angry with his client about something, but all he said (talking very stiff and stuffy) was that she could expect formal perjury charges to be filed against her in the next week or two. There would be a hearing in D.C. to set bail, and the bail wouldn't be pocket change, either. The new committee chairman and the counsel had agreed they were going to have her tail on toast, and something in Shelly's voice told Brick that the lawyer felt it was his client's fault.

Magdalen hadn't even picked up the phone. Had just lain there in the Hide-A-Bed, staring up at the ceiling, a faint smile on her face. Lain there naked, with the covers down around her belly and her fingers interlaced behind her head: that position had always been a signal between them, but when Brick had kissed her nipples she'd ignored him, and when he'd started to tongue a line down from her navel she'd just pushed his head away. Angry and hurt, he'd retreated into the shower. When he'd come out she was gone again and hadn't returned. . . . He looked down at his watch: 9:35—she'd been gone more than twelve hours.

Normally he wouldn't have worried. Back when Hecate was shoving out live sex and political scandal five nights a week (plus two matinees), Magdalen would vanish from time to time: for one night, occasionally for two, once for a whole week, without telling anybody at the theater a thing. (Scared the shit out of them, that time.) Brick hadn't known her so well then, and he'd asked her where she'd gone, told her how worried the cast and crew had been.

She'd heard him out, her eyes like green ice, but not nearly as cold as her voice when she'd spoken: "Don't you ever get the idea—any of you—that you're all the life I have," she'd begun, and then had proceeded to tear a strip off him that

stung for weeks. He would sooner die than go through that again.

All the same, he could wonder, as he popped one Budweiser after another and stared unseeing at the screen. Was she with Kenny? And if she was, what were they doing? Brick had already discarded the obvious suspicion (the one that surfaced every time Magdalen looked at another man). Kenny on Saturday had looked sicker than a dog, certainly in no condition for the kind of heavy sex Magdalen favored. And anyway, even back in the service Kenny hadn't paid much attention to women, at least not in the nonstop way the other NCOs had.

That, Brick recalled, had always been Kenny's strength—the way he stood apart from everybody else. Yet he always knew exactly what was going on. Better than that: Kenny knew what was about to be going on but hadn't happened yet. Most sergeant majors Brick had run into were loudmouthed figureheads, spit-shine burnouts put on the shelf and trotted out for parades and inspections. It was the warrant officers who knew where all the bodies were buried, who got things done. But in Brick's outfit, the man to see was always Sergeant Major Kenneth Ballard, who just sat in that little office of his, like a spider in the middle of its web, and ran everything.

The officers knew it and accepted it. Come annual inspection, the yearly dog-and-pony show when all the battalions had to match their gear, down to the last pair of boots, with the official inventory, it was Kenny who could always come up with the missing items—or something that passed for them—in the very nick of time. Without that kind of expertise, half the officers would've been punching out license plates in Leavenworth.

Of course Kenny had his own operations going, ones that Brick didn't really know about, because he'd never been able to break through to the inner circle—the Forty Thieves, they were called. Really big stuff, Brick thought, like the old M-48, all fifty-two tons of it, that came up short in the tank

battalion's inventory and was never seen again. Some poor company commander had bit the bullet on that one, was probably still paying through the nose for it.

Brick had only run diddly-squat errands for Kenny—heisting cases of coffee in the two-pound cans that were the small change of corruption on every army post. Brick's biggest deal was a nearly full box of M-67 fragmentation grenades whose paperwork had fallen between chairs, for which Kenny, grumbling, found a buyer.

When Brick had finally fixed Lieutenant Sawyer's little red wagon, it was Kenny who'd muddied up the investigation, so the worst the army could do was a faked rap for minor theft, followed by a general discharge. Even at the time, Brick couldn't figure out why Kenny had stepped in—though he was grateful as hell for it.

The telephone jarred him only partway out of his reverie, so when Kenny's voice came through the answering machine, Brick wasn't surprised to hear it. Then, as he was reaching for the phone, he realized that Kenny was calling for Magdalen. At least he's not with her, Brick thought.

"I can get what you need," Kenny was saying. He sounded pleased with himself. "It'll cost you, but not as much as I was afraid of—fifty-seven hundred for the unit itself, a couple hundred a pop for the accessories—the *regular* accessories. The other stuff, that's going to be harder, but I've got a line on it. Give me a call."

The click of the disconnect caught Brick off guard, still trying to work out what Kenny was saying or, rather, what he meant Magdalen to understand. The unit, Kenny had said—all-purpose military slang for practically anything. But this unit cost almost six thousand dollars. That was much too high for an eighty-one-millimeter mortar, especially if you had Kenny's access. Maybe he was planning to take his customer for a little ride, though. If the accessories he was talking about were practice shells, and he was charging her two hundred apiece for them, he was really ripping her off.

But even as he painfully worked out the arithmetic, Brick knew, below the level of conscious thought, that he was only kidding himself. Kenny was shopping for something a good deal bigger than a standard mortar; those weren't dummy shells he was talking about; and then there was the "other stuff" that was going to cost a whole lot more and was a lot harder to find. . . .

The new committee chairman: she's going to blow him away, maybe the other guy, the counsel, too. That had to be it. She'd got lucky with Fielding and didn't know enough to quit while she was ahead. That bullshit about wanting a weapon that would kill—what was it she said?—546 people at once, she'd just said that out of craziness.

But what if she meant it? No, that was impossible. Just the same, two guys or hundreds, he had to talk her out of—

The telephone rang again. Brick was so certain it must be Magdalen that the receiver was in his hand as the recording finished. "Where you been?" he began without preamble. "We gotta talk."

The voice was female, but not familiar: "Hello?" it said. "Is this Mr. Harley Wahl?"

"No," was his gut reaction, quick and sure. A second later he added: "You've got the wrong number. My name is *Brick* Wahl."

"Oh, yes: the actor," said the woman.

"That's right." A high-class voice, he thought, but not the kind that sounded as if they'd burned the tip of their tongue. If things were different, he'd like a look at the woman who went with that voice. Now he just wanted to get rid of her.

"Well, I'm trying to locate a Harley Wahl," she said. "I don't suppose he lives there, too?"

"Never heard of him. Sorry," he said, and hung up. Harley Wahl, he was thinking. First the cops, then Kenny, now this dame. He hadn't used his real first name in years, not since the army, and now it was coming at him from all sides. The woman who'd called wasn't NYPD, not with that accent—

and anyway, they knew he was here. The same went for Kenny. So who had she been, and why was she looking for Harley Wahl? Maybe the feds, one of the new team they'd been talking about on the TV news. . . .

He tried to damp down the rising panic with a long swig of beer, but it didn't help. I'm in the middle, and I've got to get out. But how? Who was going to help him, Joe Nobody? Worse than Joe Nobody—a porno actor with a rap sheet. A sitting duck.

Wait, he told himself. Work it through: there's a way, only I'm not seeing it. Without knowing how he'd got there, he found himself standing by the refrigerator with another Bud in his hand. That wasn't the answer, though. He poured the open can down the sink, and as he poured he saw an answer.

Magdalen's old man. Maybe he wouldn't help her with whatever looney tune caper she's got in mind, but he'd pay to keep her—and himself—off *Hard Copy* or *Nightline*. He's got more money than God, and I won't ask for much. A plane ticket to Rio, and enough cash to give me a start there. . . .

The pages of the phone book whipped past, and there it was: Wild-Freeman Publishing. He knew he should rehearse his speech—he'd never been any good ad-libbing—but his finger was already punching the buttons.

"You have reached Wild-Freeman Publishing," said the machine. He listened, stricken, as the cool voice continued. "Our switchboard is closed, but if you know the extension you want, please dial it now."

He almost hung up in despair, but the voice continued after a momentary pause: "If you don't know the extension you wish to reach, but would like to leave a message, press 'star' on your digital phone."

He stabbed desperately at the button, only to hear the cheerfully anonymous voice again: "At the tone, please give the name of the employee you wish to leave a message for, and then begin speaking. You have as much time as you wish."

Brick heard a voice not at all like his own gabble out:

"This is a message for Mr. Channing. A private message. Very important . . ."

Jesus, get a hold of yourself. He began again: "Mr. Channing, you probably don't know me, but I know somebody you know. I know her real well, if you get my meaning." He was talking too fast, but the words were boiling out of him: "She's going to do something bad. Something real terrible." He paused. Realized he had to say more, even at the risk of incriminating himself. "She's going to . . . to grease somebody—somebody *else*. A lot of somebodies: five hundred and forty-six of them. And she really means it. I can help you—"

A key was rattling in the door. He slammed the phone down, saw the open phone book, and, reaching to close it, knocked it and the phone to the floor. He was still on his knees, his hands shaking uncontrollably, when he looked up and saw Magdalen in the doorway, watching him.

19. Magdalen

2:00 A.M. TUESDAY

Magdalen laid a last stroke of green liner—too heavy for her own taste, but exactly what Brick most favored—below her left eye. Her hand, she noted, was utterly steady. She stepped back to appraise the result: perfect, she decided, from the artful derangement of her dark red hair, down the length of the see-through black teddy (the dumbest garment ever devised by man, in her opinion), to her small white feet, with freshly painted toenails the color of moist blood.

Blood. If it ended that way, it would be Brick's choice, not hers. "Ready or not," she trilled, "here I come."

The expression on his face as he watched her step through the door was a compound of feigned lust and glassy-eyed terror that almost made her giggle. He was sitting bolt upright in the Hide-A-Bed, the sheet pulled up to just below his navel, his hands clutching the hem. In the dim light of a single bulb, and that across the room, his bare torso was as muscular, as perfect, as the first day she'd seen him, topless bartender in an unlicensed East Village club. Three years ago.

Now she was standing directly in front of him, less than an arm's length away, her hands on her hips. "Well?" she said.

His tongue ran nervously around his dry lips. "C'mere, honey," he tried to say. The sound that emerged was somewhere between a croak and a squeak.

Why am I doing this? she wondered. I know he's betrayed me—I've known it since I came in the door. For that matter, Kenny had warned her yesterday and again this afternoon: "Old Harley's a squealer. Can't help himself: it's what he does. If you've got something risky going"—Kenny had regarded her blandly for a half second—"and he knows about it, he'll sell you out, sure as God made little apples."

The image of Kenny Ballard, gaunt and ravaged and twice the man Brick had ever been, was clear in her mind's eye. He was dying, a fact so evident that neither of them had bothered to mention it. And he was going to help her.

Magdalen bent forward, took Brick's fists in her hands. He didn't want to release his grip on the sheet, but finally he let her lift his hands to cup her breasts. "What's the matter?" she said. "Don't you want me, Brick? I've been wanting you all day."

And as she proceeded to tell him how much, and the ways in which she expected him to satisfy her, she found herself swept up by her own words, by the slightly hoarse, eager sound of her own voice. His big hands caressed her with automatic expertise, peeling her out of the teddy as she squirmed assistance. Naked at last, she pressed him back on the groaning, twanging bed, her hand tugging at the sheet between them, his hand clamped between her thighs.

His hot breath was in her ear; she rubbed her breasts against his hard chest; her words had broken into gasping fragments. She couldn't wait anymore, pulled back and grasped the sheet, ripped it from between them.

A long, frozen moment. He whispered, "I can't, Magdalen. I don't know why, but I just can't."

But I know why, she thought. She shaped her lips into a tender smile. "It's all right, Brick. It doesn't matter. Let's just have a drink and get some sleep."

* * *

Magdalen lay on her back, breathing slowly and evenly. Her muscles were relaxed, her eyes closed. She had never been more awake in her life. Beside her, Brick contorted himself into yet another taut knot. He was sweating, and he smelled of fear. He would not, she knew, be able to restrain himself much longer.

What if he tries to kill me? Physically there was no match between them; she wouldn't have a chance. He wouldn't even have to hurt her: he could simply tie her up and then call the cops. But she was gambling—part of her promise to herself—that he would run, not fight. Just the same, she rolled slowly over onto her belly, so that her right arm could hang naturally over the bed's edge. The cool leather surface of her shoulder bag touched the back of her hand.

The feel of it was so reassuring that she slipped more than halfway into real sleep, to come awake, her heart pounding, as she felt Brick sit up.

At least that was what it felt he was doing. She was facing away from him and didn't want to alert him by turning her head. Now his weight was concentrated on the far edge of the bedspring, all in one narrow place, and she guessed he had swung his legs over the side.

Slowly, slowly, she felt the spring adjust itself as he stood up. She tasted metallic fear at the sides of her mouth, and she allowed her right hand to slip inside the purse until her fingertips touched the cool, hard crisscross of the plastic grips.

She heard the whisper of cloth on flesh, felt the thump of a momentary stumble: he must be pulling on his shorts. Then silence, except for an awareness of movement behind her. She tensed, ready for the feel of his hands around her throat, his

knee in her back, pinning her down the way she had pinned old Fielding.

Another sound, hollow and softly metallic—a bare foot hitting an empty can? But it came from halfway across the room. She raised her head and turned it, keeping her body still. The darkness was almost complete, except for two or three wisps of streetlight around the edges of the window shade. A man-high shape, the paleness of skin with a paler streak in the middle, carrying something, feeling his way across the carpet.

Toward the door.

Her mind had rehearsed the sequence fifty times. In a single movement she rolled over and pulled herself up into a sitting position. Her left hand shot out to the bedside light and snapped it on, her right dived below the blanket.

He was standing in an awkward half crouch, his bundled clothes clutched to his chest. His face was stretched into a Greek mask of panic.

"Brick!" she said sharply. "Don't do it."

He stood frozen for so long, she thought he would relent, and then one shoe fell to the carpet. The sound seemed to free him. Two lurching steps and he was at the door, fumbling with one hand at the locks. His shoulders were rounded against her, as if expecting a blow.

The first bolt drew back with a snap. Now he was trying to pull the chain anchor free from its slot. As in a dream, Magdalen reached behind her, grabbed her pillow, and put it on her raised knees as she withdrew her right hand from beneath the covers.

"Last chance," she said. But the last chance was long gone, and both of them knew it.

20. Szabo

WILD-FREEMAN; 8:30 A.M. TUESDAY

Diana strode into Eric's office without knocking. "Do you have any strong opinions about housebreaking?" she said.

"Only one," he replied without looking up from the two sheets of paper before him. "Don't. Hire an expert to do it for you." He lifted his eyes then. She was wearing dark slacks and a sweater—not at all like her usual classically formal outfits—and her hair looked damp. He could feel her suppressed energy from halfway across the room. "You've found our Mr. Wahl," he said.

"I think so." But he could see she was sure of it. Her blue-gray eyes flicked across the two papers on his desk, and her face hardened. "Come to my office," she continued. "There's something I want you to hear." She spun on her heel and started down the hall. He slipped the papers under his desk blotter, then got up to follow her.

He found himself hurrying to keep pace with her long strides. Toward them, down the narrow editorial corridor,

rumbled the mail cart, piled high with the weekend's accumulation of slush—the unasked-for, unwanted, often unreadable manuscripts, logged in yesterday afternoon, that would wind up in Eric's office.

The cart swerved suddenly, and Diana dodged it with a quick, consummately graceful sidestep. "Good morning, Mr. Gilliam," she said.

A startled face, round and smooth and ageless, peered anxiously around the stack of manuscripts. "Morning, Miss Speed," it said. "I didn't hit you, did I?"

"No," she said. "Is that front wheel giving you trouble again?"

"The other one," said Gilliam. "Eric, here—he fixed the bad wheel for me. Now this one's bad."

"I see," she said.

"It's the bearing," Gilliam confided. "That's what Eric told me."

"Do you think it'll hold together till you finish with the morning delivery?" she asked. It was the first time Eric had heard anyone besides himself address Gilliam the mailboy (he scorned his politically correct title of interoffice messenger) like a fellow employee doing his job, rather than a pet two-year-old.

"It should be all right," Gilliam said after a long, uncertain pause. "Once I unload all Eric's slush."

"Good," said Diana. She turned to Eric. "Can I impose on you to take a look at the other wheel? Later?"

"No problem."

"Right. Then here's how we'll leave it," she said briskly. "Mr. Szabo and I have a job to do this morning. This afternoon, when you come by his office for the last pickup, he'll have a look at the other wheel. Will that work for you, Mr. Gilliam?"

Gilliam considered it for some time, while Diana waited with no trace of impatience. Finally he said, "That's okay for me, Miss Speed."

"And for you, Mr. Szabo?"

"Sure," said Eric, thinking, Unless we're in the slammer by then.

* * *

"Definitely the same voice," Eric said ten minutes later.

"That's what I thought," Diana replied. "He was pretty tightly wound when I talked to him, but when he called for the Rajah he sounded nearly over the edge. Wonder what happened in between—it was only fifteen minutes."

"How'd you know that?"

She seemed surprised by the question. "I logged my own call, of course, and the Wild-Freeman answering machine has a timer."

I'm glad we're on the same side, he thought. At least for the moment. "So what're you going to do?" he asked.

"Go talk to Mr. Harley Brick Wahl, if he's still at home," she said. "I thought you might want to come along."

* * *

It was just nine as Eric and Diana stepped out of the elevator. A handful of Wild-Freeman early birds in the lobby grudgingly made room for them before pushing aboard. A couple of them nodded to Eric, but no one appeared to recognize Diana, who was wearing a short sheepskin coat with the collar turned up, a blue cashmere version of a seaman's watch cap, and oversize reflecting sunglasses. Just before they reached the street entrance, however, Judith Sanders came through the revolving door; her face lit up as she saw Eric, then went blank.

"Good morning, Judith," said Diana, brushing past. In the street she added sotto voce, "And so another Wild-Freeman office rumor takes wing."

In the taxi (which seemed to materialize even as Diana raised her hand to hail it) she said to the driver, "Broadway and Ninety-fourth, please. Southwest corner." Turning to Eric: "So you did make a copy of the anonymous letter to Himself."

And you've got eyes like a hawk, he thought. "You knew I would," he said, keeping his voice neutral.

"And?" She was annoyed, he thought, but not much.

"A perfect match with a memo I received Friday," he said. "The same typeface, for starters, but the break in the lowercase 'o' and the tilt on the cap 'S' make it certain." She was not responding, so he added, "It's Tim Mark's printer; there's nobody networked onto it."

"Correction," she said. "It's the daisy wheel that's on his printer now. The same wheel would fit any of the seven other Citizen-35's in the shop, not to mention two or three other makes of printer that Wild-Freeman doesn't own but some employee might."

His face was as hot as her voice was cool. And he could see she hadn't finished. There were times—and this looked like one of them—when it was best to take all your medicine in a single, painful gulp. "Tell me the rest," he said.

"Tim locks his office when he leaves," she said. "I'm sure you found that out. But did you know he hides a spare key on the lintel over the door?"

"You took the words out of my mouth," said Eric. "What else?"

He had the feeling she was beginning to enjoy herself, though her tone was still magisterial: "You got a memo from Tim and spotted the two dud letters. I get memos from him nearly every day, and there's nothing wrong with my eyesight. . . ."

"As you proved this morning," he put in. "Sorry—please continue the lesson."

She drew a deep breath, and a half smile curved her mouth. "Besides, they don't make the Citizen-35 anymore, and it's getting harder and harder to find compatible print wheels—as the office manager never tires of moaning to me. So I tend to notice how fast they're wearing."

"I have a feeling there's a punch line coming," he said. And I'm going to look like an ever bigger bungler when it arrives.

"Last week, for two days, Tim's memos were coming through unblemished," she said. "Tuesday was the confidential monthly report on outstanding author advances, and Wednesday it was copies of two notes to colleagues about production delays. Both printed by what looked like a fresh wheel."

"And then on Thursday," said Eric, "there was the departmental memo that I got a copy of, with the broken 'o' and the tilted 'S' again." She was clearly waiting for him to offer the obvious deduction, and he owed it to her: "So somebody clipped Tim's print wheel for two days. Somebody who had access to his machine, and to a compatible wheel, and who wanted to stick Tim with the baby, in case there was trouble."

"That's more like it," she said. "Though I suspect our shy correspondent was more concerned with covering his own tail than frying young Mr. Mark's."

"Very possibly," said Eric. "But don't forget it's your tail he's really after." As he spoke, he was weighing the likelihood of Haskell Rose as Diana's suspect. No, he thought, the spirit's willing, but the nerve isn't there.

Once again Diana seemed to have read his mind: "I'll give you a hint," she said, and this time the glint of malicious amusement was unmistakable. "It's not an editor."

"You know who wrote the letter?"

"I didn't say that. I just said I knew it wasn't an editor. And so should you." She leaned forward. "Driver, I said the southwest corner."

"I got to go all the way around the block, then," came the sullen reply.

"That's all right," she said. "We're good for it."

Around one corner, and another, and back onto West 94th, heading east. Diana said, "Driver, would you slow down, please? We want to look at these houses."

Eric spotted the building at almost the same instant Diana did, and they exchanged looks of mild surprise, but neither spoke. At the corner Diana paid off the driver and they got

out. As he watched the cab snort away eastward, Eric said, "The Lawrence Residential Hotel: so our Mr. Wahl lives in an SRO."

"Not surprising, for an actor," Diana replied. By the way her head was cocked, Eric guessed she was appraising the neighborhood from behind the reflecting sunglasses. "Usually," she said, "I can tell if a block is going downhill or struggling back up. With this one . . ." She let the sentence hang.

Eric wondered if her hesitation was real or just a diplomatic carrot, following the stick administered in the cab. To his own eyes, squinting in the bright, chilly sunlight, the street seemed uncertain about itself—spruced-up brownstones alternating with square, fortresslike single-room-occupancy hotels and a couple of empty shells, their windows sealed with sheets of tin. The wind off the Hudson, slashing at his ankles, felt as if it had taken a running start from Albany. He envied Diana her calf-high boots, even though they made her height more noticeable than ever. On the other hand, he decided, most men would remember only her legs, anyway.

"You never know about a New York neighborhood," he said vaguely.

"I'm not familiar with hotels like Mr. Wahl's . . . ," she began.

"Does you credit," said Eric, grinning.

"But I thought I saw a sort of lobby, through the door. Is there a registration desk, too?"

"More likely a registration cage," Eric replied, and, seeing a lifted eyebrow above the sunglasses' rim, amplified: "Really. A wire-mesh cage, with a locked door. The super can sit inside, where he's reasonably safe."

"I see," she said. "Assuming the Lawrence Residential Hotel is arranged like that, how do we get past the cage?"

"Let's not assume," he said. "Let's have a look." He took her arm. I'm not sure we really want to get past the cage, he

was thinking. This setup smells like trouble to me. He glanced at what little he could see of Diana's face, the faint smile on her wide mouth.

As they approached the Lawrence's chipped and faded facade, he could feel the eagerness in her. I used to be like that, he thought. "Not too fast," he cautioned.

Providentially, the hotel's front door swung open just as they were level with it, and a figure emerged—male or female, it was impossible to be sure, under two heavy coats and an old felt hat with the brim turned down all the way around. Eric pulled up sharply, dragging Diana back, to allow the creature to wobble past in front of them—but mostly to give himself an extra second to survey the dim interior.

"I can't see a damn thing in there," muttered Diana, at his elbow.

Hallway about ten feet wide, he was thinking, trying to register as many details as possible. Elevator on the right, with some kind of cardboard sign hanging on it—maybe out of order?—super's cubicle straight back, looks like plywood with a glass window and a slot at waist height. Something showing in the slot, but what? It came to him a dozen steps later, and he stopped so quickly that Diana nearly pulled him over. "Shoes," he said.

"What about them?"

Suddenly, unexpectedly, his apprehensions were gone, the way they used to vanish when the moment to act arrived. He knew that Diana was waiting for him to give a lead; he knew that jumping farther into the Rajah's unknown muddle was rash to the point of lunacy. He saw the challenge in her eyes, and reason fled. "The super's got his feet up," he explained, turning as he spoke. "Probably asleep at his post. What d'you say?"

She grinned, and he felt as if someone had slugged him just beneath the breastbone. "Lead on, Macduff," she said.

21. Diana

As she stepped into the unlit lobby, her hand went to her sunglasses. "Leave them on," Eric murmured. "No point showing both our faces." There was a self-possession in his voice she hadn't heard before, an assurance that was nearly absolute. This was a man doing something he understood. She liked that.

After the harsh sunlight in the street, the lobby—little wider than a hallway—seemed as dark as a crypt. Smelled like one, too, she thought. But she knew it was only stale cooked food and dirty clothes and old people. For nearly a year Diana had lived in East Village sublets, working hand-to-mouth temporary jobs because she was too proud to ask for help from former Washington friends and too overqualified (God, how she hated that word) for the entry-level positions at the beginning of a new career.

It was strange: most of the sordid, demeaning memories of her year as a D.C. political wife had blurred, but the months that followed were sharp and clear, from the moment when disgust and contempt had overwhelmed her and she'd

slammed out of her husband's elegant Georgetown house and climbed aboard the Eastern shuttle, headed back to the real world.

She had been at the bottom—doing temp work for a coven of illiterate Sixth Avenue lawyers—when the Rajah had scooped her up, given her the chance she needed, set her life on its new path. At the time it had seemed so providential that she hadn't allowed herself to wonder how he'd found her. (And anyway, in her heart of hearts she knew: *Maman*, who had wheedled her into marrying the Golden Gelding in the first place, moved in one of the Rajah's many orbits.)

Eric's big hand gripped Diana's bicep, and she froze in midstep. From behind the plywood partition at the end of the lobby came a muffled groan and a clatter. She looked to her companion, who seemed unaware of her, intent on the slotted opening in the plywood box.

He's not so bad looking, if you like them slightly battered, she thought. Without that wary, injured look it's a different face entirely. "What?" she breathed.

He was grinning, the kind of expression you might see on a large, dangerous animal. He turned to her: "The super. Having a bad dream, that's all." His whisper was barely audible. "Give him a minute to settle down."

Eric's eyes went quickly to the elevator door, then back to Diana. His lips formed a word: "Noisy." He nodded toward a corner of the lobby. "Stairs."

But which floor? she wondered. And which room? The questions must have showed in her expression: Eric jerked his head toward the front door. Looking back, she saw the row of mailboxes she'd missed coming in. Most of them looked as if they'd undergone repeated assault with edged tools—and they probably had: once a month, when the Social Security or relief checks were due.

He was urging her forward again, toward the fire stairs. Once past the plywood box, she plucked off the sunglasses and jammed them in her pocket. Now she could make out

the faded sign stenciled on the door in front of her—NO ACCESS TO UPPER FLOORS FROM THIS STAIRCASE.

"Leave your gloves on," he whispered. He eased the door open just far enough to slip through, then held it for her. The stairwell was colder than the lobby, dripping damp, and rank with the smell of urine. A single bare bulb lit the ground-floor landing. Eric bounded up the concrete steps, and she followed.

At each floor he paused, tested the steel entry door. "What if they're all locked?" Diana asked at the third floor.

"Oh, I can open them," he said over his shoulder. "Makes extra noise, leaves needless traces."

At the fourth floor he found what he wanted—the entry door's bolt wedged open with a matchbook. "There's always one," he said, grinning.

He's done this before, she thought, following him into a narrow hallway whose stucco walls had a cavernlike roughness in the chiaroscuro of yellow bulbs. He led the way to the elevator, pressed the button. "Our man's down one floor."

The elevator arrived with a metallic clank that echoed down the shaft. "That should wake up Cerberus in the lobby," said Diana.

"He won't care, as long as it's up here," Eric said. The door closed. "How's your come-hither voice?"

She had been wondering how he planned to get into Brick Wahl's apartment. "To tell you the truth, it's not one of my better effects," she said. "Had you thought of bellowing 'Police: Open up!' and kicking the door in?"

"That's my fallback," he said. "But in a place like this, you always get a couple of old biddies who stick their noses out for the excitement." He pressed three, and the elevator shuddered into motion. "Just give it your best shot."

What would be irresistible to an actor who lived in a dump like this? she asked herself. "Brick, sweetie, I'm from William Morris/MGM/Andrew Lloyd Webber." No, that was probably aiming a little high. "Hey, Brick—they're auditioning for the

Idaho road company of *Guys and Dolls*" might be more like it, but she hadn't any idea what kind of acting Brick Wahl did.

In the end she opted for little old lady: "Mr. Wahl?" she piped. "Are you there? It's Mrs. Mumble from upstairs. I have this package addressed to you."

Eric had his ear flat against the door. His wide-eyed surprise made her want to giggle. "Again," he mouthed.

"Mr. Wahl?" She raised her voice slightly and put a peevish quaver into it. "This package they put in my box? It looks like jewelry. I don't like to just leave it."

Eric stepped back from the door. He leaned toward her, and for an insane moment she thought he was going to kiss her ear. His whisper was at the bare threshold of audibility. "Not a sound. I don't think anyone's there."

She raised an inquiring eyebrow, and in answer he made a curious, wrist-snapping gesture, like someone trying to shake down the mercury in a fever thermometer. Metal glittered in his hand, and he held it up—a knife with a wide, double-edged blade shaped like a leaf and a handle wrapped in black tape. As she watched, he pushed the knife's point between the door frame and the trim piece that covered the door's edge. With consummate care he levered the trim piece away from the frame, until a gap perhaps a quarter of an inch wide rewarded his efforts.

Now he produced a small flashlight and aimed it into the crack he had made. After a few seconds he straightened up, shaking his head. "Damned suspicious New Yorkers," he whispered. "Three goddamn locks."

"Maybe it's open," she said. "You haven't tried the knob."

He rolled his eyes but tested the knob. The door didn't open, but he looked pleasurably surprised. "Feels like it's just the door bolt," he said. He bent again, pushing the knife into the narrow slot. Diana heard the scratch of metal on metal, followed by a sharp click. The door swung open three inches and stopped.

Eric's face had gone very still. "What is it?" she asked.

He looked straight into her eyes. "How's your stomach?" he said.

A challenge . . . or was it? "Try me."

He stepped back to let her look. Through the opening she could see a cluttered, unkempt room—a man's room, without a doubt. A corner of rag rug and the bottom of a folding bed. And on the floor, just at the edge of her line of sight, a man's bare, muscular forearm, the fingers clawing stiffly at the bare wood.

"I'll go in first," whispered Eric. She was not about to dispute the honor. He had to put his shoulder to the door and shove hard before whatever was blocking it shifted enough to let them edge in.

The corpse was young, built like an athlete, and very handsome. He was wearing only jockey shorts and lying on his stomach in a congealed, dark red puddle that was centered around his upper chest; his head and one shoulder, which had blocked the swing of the door, now pushed it closed.

Diana felt her stomach catch, but she forced herself not to turn away. She felt Eric watching her. There will be a test, she told herself. Don't miss a thing.

One small, circular hole, the center of a blackened and abraded ring of hair and skin, in the left temple just above the ear. A congealed, unspeakable puddle under his head that hinted at what the exit wound in the right temple would look like. Another hole, without the burns, in the man's back, an inch to the left of the spine, immediately below the rib cage.

A man's shoe lay by the body; its mate was between the rigidly extended bare feet. The dead man's buttocks were raised a few inches, and Diana thought she could see a sort of dark bundle under his belly, half in and half out of the blood.

Eric had dropped to his haunches beside the corpse and was staring at it abstractedly. He looked up, toward the unmade Hide-A-Bed (something funny about it—what?), then back at the body, as if measuring an angle. Someone in the bed shot him in the back, Diana thought. And then they got up, went to him, and put a second bullet in his brain, to make

certain. Without warning, her own brain conjured up a picture of the young man on the floor, flopping and gasping in a final spasm, and a second figure kneeling at his side, gently pressing a pistol to his temple. . . .

"If you're going to throw up," Eric said coldly, "do it in the john and clean up very carefully afterward."

She took a deep breath, swallowed twice. "Sorry. What do you want me to do?"

"Before we do anything," he said, "we've got a decision to make." His mouth twitched into a humorless half smile. "You do, really: you're the one with something to lose."

You've already made your choice, then, she thought. Well, so have I. "I thought you knew who I worked for," she said.

"If there's trouble, he'll throw you to the sheep without a backward glance," said Eric. "We're talking felony here."

"You're wasting time."

He regarded her without a word for a long minute. "All right," he said. "I want to know who was here . . ."

"The other person in the bed," she said.

"The other person in the bed who held a pillow over the thirty-eight while he or she shot Mr. Wahl in the back," he said.

That was what had looked odd: marks where two people had been lying, but only one pillow. "And who then got up and administered a coup de grâce," she said.

"If you'll stop one-upping me," he said, "we may get through before the police arrive."

As long as she didn't have to look closely at the near naked young man on the floor, Diana decided, she'd be all right. She started in the bathroom—if there'd been a woman in the apartment, that was where to look for traces of her—and when she had finished came back into the living room.

Eric was squatting next to the corpse, his face two shades paler than before. She didn't want to see what he was doing, but her mind noted that the body had shifted position.

Why is the phone book on the floor? She dropped to one

knee, picked it up. Several pages near the end had been crumpled together, as if the book had fallen or been dropped, facedown and open. She opened the book at the beginning of the crumple, and the bold-faced entry—**Wild-Freeman Publng**—jumped off the page at her.

She closed the book, set it down exactly where she'd found it, and only then saw the answering machine partway under the unfolded Hide-A-Bed. A red light was flashing on it, and she fished it out by the cord. The window showed a single message, and she keyed the button.

A man's voice, rough edged. Pleased with himself. What else? "You there, sweetheart?" it said. "This is top. Kenny. Listen, I can get what you need. . . ."

When the message ended and the tape was rewinding, she looked to Eric. "What do you think?"

"I think we'll take that tape with us."

"Maybe we'd better take the whole machine," she said. "A missing tape calls attention to itself."

His approving grin warmed her like a shot of cognac. She unplugged the phone from the answering machine and the machine from the wall jack. As she was working the phone's own plug into the jack, she saw, from the corner of her eye, Eric slipping a small brown oblong into the side pocket of his jacket. Well, so much for camaraderie.

A moment later, in the dust and cobwebs under a corner of the bed, she noticed a cylindrical object. Tit for tat, she thought, reaching out. When she realized what it was, her eyes widened and her face went hot. But she put it in her pocket all the same.

Five minutes later Diana was on her knees, trying to peer behind the Hide-A-Bed. Without turning (Eric had rolled the corpse over on its back), she called, "When you're free, I'd like to move the bed enough to get behind it."

She heard an unnerving, meaty thump from behind her, and Eric's voice, tight and irritable, demanded, "What's behind the bed?"

"A funny smell," she replied. "Mildew, I think."

"Just a minute." He knelt by her side. She had half expected his gloved hands to be dripping blood, but they showed no signs of whatever he had been doing. "You're right," he said. "I'm afraid we'll have to fold the damn thing up before we can lift it."

The aperture in the wall was about three feet high and half as wide. A flap of wallpaper hung in front of it, and Diana rolled it up. From inside came the smells of mildew—far stronger, now—and oiled machinery and something that wasn't quite tobacco. "Give me your flashlight," said Diana.

"Are you sure—"

"You did the body," she snapped.

"Fair's fair," he murmured, and passed her the flash. She wedged her head, arm, and most of one shoulder into the gap. "What's in there?" he asked after a few seconds.

"I think," she said, trying not to breathe as she spoke, "I'd better hand things to you."

* * *

The opened containers and unwrapped packages covered several square feet of flooring. Eric shook his head in disbelief. "A military packrat," he said.

"Where do you suppose he got all this junk?"

" 'Why' seems more to the point," Eric said. He nudged a carton with his foot. "Field rations, for Christ's sake. Who in his right mind would steal those? A dozen dress uniforms, two boxes of practice hand grenades," he continued, "six obsolete lensatic compasses, a dead walkie-talkie . . ." He stooped and plucked an oblong bit of metal from a cardboard box that was full of them. "Empty clips for forty-five automatics. Jesus."

"There is some civilian—or at least nonmilitary—stuff," Diana pointed out. "Ziploc bag with about twenty spliffs. Screw-top glass jar half full of suspicious white powder. And

this." She hefted a plastic shopping bag, from which the smell of mildew seemed to originate.

"You looked at what's in it?"

"Of course," Diana replied. "Women's clothes. Leather jacket, a little showy but quite expensive; black Lycra stirrup slacks, ditto; soft-sole leather boots, with a pair of leather driving gloves stuffed in one of them; blue wool watch cap, like mine but real navy surplus. All of it was soaking when it was stuffed into the bag. Dry now, but mostly ruined."

"Tell me about the wearer," Eric said. "Whatever comes into your head."

Now that, she thought, is as good a compliment as I'm going to get. "Okay," she said slowly, gathering her thoughts. "A woman, of course. Shorter than me . . ."

"Who isn't?"

She made a face at him and continued: "About five seven. Full-bodied: I wouldn't mind having her chest, if her waist didn't go with it. Feet on the small side, but quite large hands. Dark red hair—I found a couple in the cap."

"Not bad," he said, but she held up her hand.

"I'm not through. Green eyes, full lips, probably freckles, short nails." She paused for his reaction.

"That's amazing, Holmes!" he said with exactly the Nigel Bruce wheeze. And in his own voice: "How sure are you?"

"Reasonably," she replied. "If you want to know a woman, look in her bathroom. I found a tissue she'd blotted her lipstick on—fire-engine red, by the way, like her nail polish. Nail clippings. Green eyeliner, which usually goes with green eyes . . ."

"Which often go with red hair," he put in. "And the freckles?"

"Also go with red hair, and with the type of spilled makeup in the sink."

"I'll buy the whole package," he said. "So what's bugging you?"

"I can't make sense of what happened," said Diana. "That paint job must've taken a good hour. She then proceeded to wipe off a good deal of it on the sheets. Amorous thrashing, presumably with what's-his-name over there."

"Definitely," said Eric. "Her lipstick's on Harley's face and neck. Her makeup, too."

"So that is Harley Wahl," she said, and her eyes went automatically to the body, then flicked quickly away.

"Either Harley or somebody else with *HJW* tattooed on his forearm," Eric agreed. "Would you like my thumbnail reconstruction of the killing?"

"Please," she said.

"I don't know about what went before," he said. "I'm inclined to think they went at it, but to know for sure you'd need to—" He saw the look on her face and hurried on: "Anyway, they're in bed. Harley's naked, or maybe has his shorts on. He thinks she's asleep. Maybe she is. Anyway, he gets up, grabs the bare essentials: pants, sweater, shoes . . ."

"Bare essentials?" she asked.

"He was bugging out," Eric said. "He tiptoes for the door, but he drops a shoe. She wakes up, turns on the light. While he's fiddling with those three locks, she grabs her pistol, wraps a pillow around it, takes careful aim, and shoots him in the back."

"How do you know about the light?"

"He's beginning to get a little stiff, so it probably happened sometime last night," Eric said. "Also, the light was on when we came in."

"Sounds to me as if she was awake all along," said Diana. "Just waiting."

"More than likely," Eric agreed. "From the angle of the entrance and exit wounds, I'd guess she fired from a sitting position, maybe with the gun braced on her knees. Old Harley was as good as dead right then, but she got up and made absolutely sure."

"Ugh," Diana said with a shudder she couldn't control. "I

wonder if she overheard him trying to call the Rajah. I wonder if that was what decided her."

"Might have been," he said.

"Then she didn't kill him right away," Diana continued. "She went through the next however many hours, just waiting for the magic moment. A tough lady."

He looked at her oddly. "One thing's sure: She's done this kind of job before. The first shot was good, but that second was a real professional touch."

"A professional wouldn't kill for fun," she said. "A professional would need a reason."

"The usual professional reason is an assignment," said Eric. "I think . . ."

"I think so, too," she said. "Before this goes any farther, I want some answers from the Rajah."

"That'll be the day," he said. "But you give it a try. I've got an angle of my own to follow up."

She had an idea what it might be but decided not to question him. "All right," she said. "This time, don't try to freeze me out."

His expression was pure innocence. "Who, me? Tell you what, let's get together—say, after work tomorrow—and trade secrets."

Including what's in your jacket pocket. "Sounds good. What about all this stuff?" she asked. "Do we leave it as is?"

"Might as well," he said. "No: those women's clothes in the plastic bag. Bring them along."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But they don't fit with anything else, and they probably belong to our mystery lady."

"Yes," said Diana, picking up the bag and wedging the small answering machine in with the musty clothing. "And one other reason to bring them: Somebody took the trouble to hide them."

22. Kenny

QUEENS BOULEVARD AND 86TH AVENUE; WEDNESDAY MORNING

She was waiting on the corner when he pulled the van up to the curb: a sturdy figure in jeans and a navy pea jacket, its collar turned up around her neck. Her dark red hair was a flag in the breeze. "Morning," he said, giving her a big smile. "I like a woman who's on time."

She swung aboard without a word, her face like stone, and arranged herself cross-legged on what had been the van's package shelf. Well, if that's the way you want to be, he thought, but the stab of disappointment was sharp: he'd been looking forward to this morning. Looking forward to this morning with her.

The van was back on the Van Wyck, rolling south with the morning JFK flow, before he figured it out. "I was right, then," he called out over the loud hum of the tires. "About ol' Harley."

She didn't look at him, but her hand fumbled in the pocket of the pea jacket and drew out the police special he'd given her. She passed it over without a word.

He flipped the cylinder out. Two rounds gone. "Well," he said, but couldn't think what came next. He shoved the revolver into his own coat pocket.

"He sold me out," she said suddenly. "He was calling somebody right when I came in." Her voice sounded only just under control, but loud enough, without straining, to drown the clatter around them. Harley was—had been—an actor, Kenny reminded himself; so, he decided, was the woman who called herself Mary Tolliver.

"Cops?" said Kenny.

"I don't think so," she said after a moment. She managed an unconvincing smile. "He was even more scared of the police than of me."

She seemed to have run out of steam, and to keep her going, Kenny observed, "Not easy, going through life scared of everything that moves. But you"—he flashed his grin at her—"you wouldn't know about that."

It was more effective than he'd expected. She pulled herself up straight-backed and looked him in the eye. "That's right," she said. "I'm not afraid of anything. Not even you."

"No reason to be scared of me," he said, wheeling the van off onto the Belt Parkway exit. "The way I figure it," he continued as he muscled the wheel around, "you and I are like birds of a feather, Mary. We are a matched pair."

This time she laughed. "So where have you been all my life, Kenny Ballard?"

"Oh, here and there," he said. "Around in the world."

" 'Walking about, seeking whom you may devour'?" she said.

"First Peter, chapter five," he said automatically, and when she looked at him in surprise, he explained: "Bible quotations. It was a game when I was a kid." He laughed. "I started off in a good family, before I went wrong."

"Sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll?" she suggested.

"The U.S. Army, if you really want to know." He shook his head. "Wanted to improve myself. Be all I could

be—like in the commercial. Electronics. Computers. All that shit."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "I was too good at being a soldier. It came natural to me. Some people are born musicians; I was a born thirty-year man."

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I can see that. You've got . . . authority." A long, slow smile. "A lot of men would give their right arm to have that."

"Command presence," he said. The anger, never far under the surface, welled up in him. "I've given a lot more than my right arm for it." His hands were clenched on the steering wheel so hard, his fingers were starting to cramp. "You might say it's what's killing me," he added softly. He saw she was waiting for him to explain, and something told him this was the time. He drew in a conscious breath, let it out slowly.

"What I've got isn't AIDS," he said. "In case you were wondering. 'S a kind of leukemia, picked it up in 'Nam."

"But—"

"The army doesn't agree," he said. "They say I got it on my own time, after I was discharged. So much for twenty-five years, youngest top soldier in the division." She looked puzzled, and he explained: "Sergeant major. That's how I got the nickname, what I called myself on the phone: Top."

"On the phone?" she said slowly.

"When I called Monday night." He saw his answer in her face. "You didn't get my message." The van lurched to the right, and the front tire squealed against the curb. He wrestled the wheel back, against the familiar knotted pain up his arms. "I figured, when you called . . ."

"I just needed to talk to you," she said simply.

Isn't that the way of it? he thought. The woman I've wanted to meet all these years, telling me what I've wanted to hear, and it's too late. "Then Harley must've heard my message to you," he said, working it out in his head. "Maybe that was what tipped him over the edge." He considered the possibili-

ties, then asked: "You didn't hear what he was saying? To whoever he sold you out to?"

She shook her head. "I was just too late. Or maybe he broke off when he heard me. That message you left, was it . . ."

"Nothing incriminating," he said quickly, then made himself reconsider. "Maybe a little suspicious, though. It's still on Harley's machine, then?"

"As far as I know," she replied. She pursed her lips, as if tasting something bitter; Kenny knew she was about to admit a weakness and hated doing it: "I'm a little out of my depth here," she said.

Reluctant and understated, it was still an invitation to take charge. Kenny was familiar with that tone, from commissioned officers too numerous to remember, sidling up to Master Sergeant/First Sergeant/Sergeant Major Ballard. But now it didn't annoy him, the way it so often had. Quite the opposite. "You need to disappear," he said. "Like totally: off the face of the earth."

"I've already done that," she replied. "Got a new apartment, a new name, dropped out of my old life."

"Good," he said, thinking, Maybe good. "Did you clean up behind yourself? Papers, clothes, anything that could lead to the new you?"

"Yes," she said. But when she said, "Yes," again, more firmly, he knew she hadn't.

"The new name," he pressed. "D'you have papers to back it up? Are they good ones?"

Her confidence, he could see, was rock solid on this point. "Yes, I have papers; and yes, they're good. In fact, they're real."

"Okay," he said. "Who'd you get the papers from? I don't mean specifically. I mean, does your source know who you really are?"

She put her hand on his wrist. Her fingers were cool and smooth. "Forget the papers, Kenny," she said. "Except for you, the only people who knew my old and new names are

dead. There's no connection left between—" She caught herself so quickly, he almost missed the tiny hesitation: "Between the old me and Mary Tolliver."

It was as much as he was going to get from her, he saw. At least for now. "Okay," he said. "Now, this movie you're making . . ."

He deliberately let the sentence dangle, inviting her to open up, and she rewarded him: "I think we can bag the movie, Kenny. What I want to do is kill some people."

Her words were almost a purr, and when he turned to get a good look at her, she was smiling her cat smile. "Whatever," he said. "I don't want to know any more." Which was not entirely true, but the safest thing to say at this stage.

"Up to you," she said, shrugging. He hit the brakes then as the traffic slowed for the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel entrance. "Where are we going, anyway?" she asked.

"Jersey," he replied. "I've got a little surprise for you."

* * *

It was waiting for them, in a little clearing in the pine barrens, three plastic-wrapped bundles laid out on the sand with military neatness. As Kenny labored to assemble it, his fingers working with automatic precision, she sat cross-legged and watched him intently. He knew that his every movement was being etched on her memory.

At last he rocked back on his heels, trying to hide the fact that his breath was coming in desperate gasps. "You like?" he managed.

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh, God, yes." Her eyes were glowing. She took a hesitant step forward, feet crunching in the gritty sand, and ran her hand up and down the metal tube, angled upward toward the sun. "Is this it?" she asked. "The one I'm buying?"

"If you want it," he said. His breathing was almost under control now, but the sweat was still streaming down his shaking body. "It's on approval, you might say."

"It's bigger than I thought it'd be," she said. She grinned at him. "Looks very potent."

He decided to misunderstand her. "I hope it'll do the job," he said. "It's about the biggest unit a couple of guys can manhandle into position. The three main components—not counting the rounds—weigh three hundred and thirty pounds, all together."

She ran the tip of her forefinger around the diameter of the muzzle. "It certainly looks big enough," she said. The tip of her tongue moistened her lips.

I'll be damned, he thought. She's turned on by it. And for the first time in months—in more than a year—he felt a twinge of desire in himself. "The projectiles are big mothers—about four and a quarter inches across," he said. His voice sounded hoarse in his own ears.

"Yes," she said. "I want to see it shoot."

"Thought you might," he said. "I brought a couple of practice rounds. They're in the van. . . ."

"I'll get them," she said quickly. And then, looking around her at the flat, windy barrens on every side, "You're sure it's all right? I don't even know where we are."

"Closed-down part of an army post," he replied. "No problem: I checked with friends of mine. Nobody comes out here." But just to be on the safe side, he spread the topo map out on the sand, lined it up with the sun, and weighted down the corners with stones. A clear mile down range, he thought, and began to adjust the elevating screw. When he swiveled around she was kneeling behind him, watching. She had shucked off her pea jacket, and the wind was pressing her man's shirt against her full breasts.

"These what you wanted?" she said, indicating the two practice rounds laid side by side on the sand.

He picked one up. It was heavier than he remembered. "You got a handkerchief?" he asked. She handed it over: simple but expensive looking, with *MT* embroidered in the corner. Now that's what I call attention to detail, he thought.

Unless her real initials are MT, too. "Next time," he said, carefully dusting the projectile, "don't get sand on them, if you can help it." She nodded, her eyes locked on his face. "This isn't exactly a high-tech weapon," he continued, feeling as if the words were being sucked out of him by her concentration. "But the more care you take with it, the more accurate it'll be."

She nodded again. Suddenly Kenny knew he would carry this image of her to his grave: on her knees in the dry sand, her palms gripping her thighs, leaning forward with eagerness, her lips parted slightly.

"Okay," he said. "Now, I've set the range already, so we're ready to fire. D'you know what your range is going to be?"

"Not exactly," she said. "Not too far."

That was what he might have expected. "Well, you'll have to measure it off exactly," he said. "We're working with eight hundred yards here—which is near the minimum for the four-deuce."

He held the round up, slipped its tail into the tube. "All you do is let her slide in," he said. "And get your head out of the way, fast." He released the bomb-shaped round. As he ducked away he heard it rasp down the tube. The sound of it firing—a flat *whump!*—was like old times, and he found himself looking up, trying to trace the projectile's flight.

"These are practice rounds, so there's no explosion," he said. "With the real thing, you've got to spot the fall, so you can correct your aim."

She was openmouthed, and it took a couple of seconds for his words to register. "What if you're very, very careful?" she asked. "If you know the exact distance to your target."

"Even so," he said. "The first two, three rounds are just for ranging. And that's if you're really good."

"You're really good, aren't you?" she said.

"I used to be, but that was a while ago," he said. He picked up the second projectile, flicked the sand off it. "Here, you try."

"Oh, can I? Really?" She sounded for a moment like a little girl. But she exactly mimicked every move he had made, even the half wobble when he'd momentarily lost his balance. With the round poised, she looked to him. "Now?"

"Remember to pull your head back," he said, but he knew the warning was unnecessary.

A second *whump!* This time, watching for it, he saw the streak against the bright sky.

"Jesus," she whispered. "That's *it*." Her face had the gleaming innocence of a kid's on Christmas morning, and it was hard for him to believe that she really meant to blow away—what was it?—five hundred and some human beings. But then he recalled exactly the same look on the face of a young bombardier who'd just flattened an entire village. It was the face of power, he reflected. God probably looked like that the morning after the Flood.

"So you'll take it," he said. "The HE shells—high explosive—will run about two fifty each. The gas projectiles, those are negotiable."

"You've found the person who has them," she said.

"I've found a guy who knows a guy," he corrected. "This part is very tricky."

"I want them."

Christ, he thought, ol' Harley never had a chance.

"And that's not all I want," she added.

He'd already seen her nipples standing hard against the fabric of her shirt. Her lips were wet and open. *You don't know what you're asking, lady*, but he could see in her eyes that she did. And suddenly he was as ready and as able as she was. "Right here on the sand, Mary?" he asked.

She was unbuttoning her shirt, her eyes devouring him. "Right here, Top," she said. "And my name is Magdalen."

23. Bernie

Manhattan, Central Park; Wednesday afternoon

Holding the brown paper bag that contained his invariable lunch—a blameless tuna sandwich and a single New Zealand apple—Bernie Plunkett balanced on the curb as the traffic light changed, and changed again. And yet again. He was beginning to wonder if he had heard Eric's instructions correctly, when a dark Toyota angled sharply across the Park Drive's three lanes and pulled up in front of him. The passenger door swung open, and Bernie edged himself in.

"Thanks for coming," said Eric, pulling back into the traffic stream.

"Happy to oblige," Bernie responded not quite truthfully. "Where are we going?"

"Round and round," said Eric. "At least, the car is; I hope the same won't be true of us."

Bernie had already noted the red-and-white Avis sticker on the windshield and guessed that Eric had rented the car as a bug-resistant enclosure. "I don't know if I can help you," he said. "In fact, I'm not sure I should be here at all."

"You're clean," Eric assured him, answering the thought beneath the words. "I've been tracking you since you came into the park." He grinned at Bernie. "And I'm not wired, in case you were wondering."

"Well, I hope not," Bernie replied. He's changed. It's as if he'd been hibernating and just woke up. "Perhaps you'd better tell me what this is about."

"You know what my assignment is." Not a question, but not quite a statement, either; an invitation, Bernie decided.

"I'm not in his confidence on this one, Eric. I don't see your reports." Bernie wondered if resentment—sudden and sharper than he'd expected—sounded in his voice. But Eric gave no sign of having heard anything but the words.

"Even so," he said, "you must've figured out the general outlines of the problem. He couldn't hide that from you, even if he wanted to."

Flattery? Maybe, but it was true enough: when you attended to so many intimate details of a man's life, an overall picture was bound to form. And in this case the Rajah's concern had made him oblivious of what he was giving away. Rather than answer directly, Bernie temporized: "Have you asked him yourself?"

"Diana's doing that," said Eric.

A mistake, Bernie knew instantly. The Rajah would never tell his woman problems to another woman—and certainly not to this particular woman.

Eric seemed to read Bernie's thought in his silence: "It was her idea, not mine."

Why so defensive, Eric? But Bernie wasn't ready to consider that aspect and said: "Perhaps if your question is very specific . . ."

"Okay," said Eric. "Who's the mystery woman?" His eyes darted to the rearview mirror, then back to the older man. "Is that specific enough? Because that's what it boils down to: we can't fend her off if we don't know who she is."

We: so that's it. "I don't know, Eric," Bernie said. "Hon-

estly, I don't." Well, that possibility was built in from the start, he was thinking. Himself should have foreseen it. And then he realized that the Rajah had foreseen it—almost: if you put two aggressive loners into the same small pot, the odds-on bet was that they'd be at each other's throats. Creative tension, the Rajah called it, and it nearly always worked. But if they didn't go for each other's throats . . .

"Come off it, Bernie," said Eric, but he sounded only resigned: he knew the rules.

As Bernie waited for the next question, he appraised his companion. He doesn't know it yet. Does she feel the same way? And, more important, will the Rajah see what's happening with them?

"Here's what we've got on the lady so far," Eric said as they approached a Y in the northbound Park Drive. He swung the Toyota into the lane that would take them back south again and, once more, glanced into the rearview mirror. "You just correct me if I'm wrong, okay?"

"If I can." Bernie settled back on the seat, took out his sandwich, and bit into it.

"Description," Eric said. "Red hair, pale complexion, freckles. Medium height. Zaftig. And a murderess."

Jolted out of his pose of detachment, Bernie choked, swallowed hard. "You know about that?"

Eric seemed equally startled. "You mean, you do, too?"

Something's wrong with this picture, Bernie thought, and phrased his next question with care. "I just meant, you've made the connection very quickly," he said. "I trust it's your own deduction, and not from the authorities."

"The cops?" Eric looked bewildered. "How could they know so fast?"

"So fast?" Bernie echoed, completely lost.

"We only found the body this morning," said Eric. "Three or four hours after she blew him away."

"Oh, *no*," Bernie said before he could stop himself.

Eric's eyes widened, then narrowed. For several minutes

they drove in silence. Finally Eric said, "I'll tell you about our murder, Bernie, if you'll tell me about yours."

Bernie managed an unhappy nod of agreement. "Please," he said.

"The victim was named Harley J. Wahl. An actor who used the professional name Brick Wahl." He paused, his head cocked to one side, eyeing Bernie. "Why do I have the feeling you've heard of Mr. Wahl? Anyway, he lives—lived in an SRO on West Ninety-fourth called the Lawrence, which was where our femme fatale put two slugs into him: one in his back from about ten feet, and then a clincher into his head, with the muzzle pressed right to his temple. After which she cleared out, destination unknown."

Clearly Eric was waiting for a reaction. "How did you happen to find this Mr. Wahl?" Bernie asked.

"Oh, that," said Eric. His face lit with an untrustworthy smile. "Wahl called Wild-Freeman last night, very excited. He wanted to speak to our peerless leader. Asked for him by name."

It's coming unstuck, the whole mess. "Who knows about this?" Bernie snapped.

"Diana and I," Eric replied. "You, of course—and Himself, by now. The Wild-Freeman operator, too: Wahl's message was on the company answering machine this morning. Diana blanked it, though."

Thank God for that, at least, Bernie thought. "What exactly was the message?" he asked. "What did Wahl want?"

"He hung up before he got to what he wanted," said Eric. "The message was just a warning. A woman the Rajah knew was going to kill a lot of people. Five hundred and forty-six was the number he mentioned. . . ."

"Five hundred and forty-six? Really?"

"That's what Wahl said." Eric gave a snort that might have been a laugh. "Maybe it's five hundred and forty-five now."

This is not my forte, Bernie thought, his head spinning. I've got to get help. Himself has got to be told. But there

was one assurance he needed first. "You didn't call anyone about this . . . ," he began.

Eric regarded him with open amusement. "Hardly. And there's no reason to suppose anybody else has stumbled over Mr. Wahl. Yet."

Bernie reached for the door handle, but Eric's arm across his chest slammed him back onto the passenger seat. "Just a minute, Bernie: we've only had half a conversation. Who else has she killed?"

"I can't say for sure—"

"Bullshit."

"I'm just not able to, Eric." He felt the pressure across his chest ease, and he went on: "I will tell you this, though: She is very important to Mr. Channing." Bernie weighed his words against the expression on Eric's face, decided to supply the extra emphasis. "More important than anyone else in the world, I think. And if she is caught, arrested . . ." He shook his head. "Disaster."

"He wants her protected, then?" said Eric, and, seeing Bernie's astonishment, snarled: "That's how little I've been told, damn it."

Protected, Bernie thought, turning the word over in his mind. "Yes," he said slowly. "Just now, I'd say that's what he wants for her. Later, he might feel differently."

Complete understanding linked them for a fraction of a second. Understanding and, from Bernie, something more. Eric's eyes dropped. He opened the car door. "I think you'd better get on your horse, Bernie."

"Thanks. I'm sorry—"

"If I were you, I'd call Van Bronk," said Eric. "He knows how to clean up a mess like this."

Yes, thought Bernie, getting slowly out of the car. Ex–FBI forensics: the very man. "Go carefully, Eric."

"One other question," said Eric.

On the sidewalk Bernie knew he was safe, so this was an appeal, not a demand. "Ask me."

"That number bothers me: five hundred and forty-six."

It bothers me, too, Bernie thought. But he shrugged his most dismissive shrug and said, "Just a way of getting the listener's attention, I expect."

"Probably," said Eric. "But suppose for a minute the late Mr. Wahl actually meant what he said; suppose the mystery lady told him she was going to kill five hundred and forty-six people. . . ."

To look away from those suddenly hard brown eyes was impossible, and so was the necessary lie. Bernie heard himself say, "I think she could do it. Yes."

24. Diana

East 50th Street; 6:30 p.m.

During Diana's three years with the Rajah, she had often observed him in a state of wrath, and while duly impressed—the blazing yellow eyes, the leonine roar, were spectacular by any standard—she sensed that it was largely a performance. This was very different: the voice coming through the telephone receiver was low pitched and cold, almost contemptuous, and the net effect was extraordinarily unpleasant. She felt like an intrusive, not-too-bright child who had blundered into the affairs of adults.

Eric Szabo's assignment was none of Diana's business, the Rajah told her. She should have been able to see that much immediately—should have acted with the discretion her employer had a right to expect from someone at her level. Instead she had been carried away by territorial defensiveness or, worse, by some kind of female curiosity. In the future—if there were to be a future—she would work within her instructions, not use them as an excuse for frivolous meddling. . . .

The onslaught, in response to her single, diplomatically

phrased question, was so unexpected that it left her reeling, and while most of the assault was savagely unfair, fairness had never been one of the Rajah's terms of employment. Besides, there was just enough truth in his icy dissection of her motives to maintain her in a smoldering silence.

At last he said, "Is that entirely clear, Miss Speed?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. The words of submission were not at all what she wanted to say, but they were somehow the only possible response.

"I hope so," he said. Several seconds passed. In the receiver distant waves hissed and broke: she recognized the familiar background noise of a mobile phone, knew her employer could be calling from a plane over the Antipodes or a limousine down the block.

She waited, knowing he was not finished, fighting to control her boiling emotions. When the Rajah spoke his voice was still militant, but no longer Olympian. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about," he said. "I was going to wait, but it seems to be part of the same problem."

Baffled, she said, "What does?"

"Your . . . relationship with Mr. Szabo."

This was simply outrageous—so much so that she could only stare as he continued: "Your private life is your own business, of course. But apparently you aren't keeping it very private."

"Is that so?" she said, and suddenly the spell was broken: she could not recall having been so furious, quite unable to hold herself in check. "Who's the accuser—my anonymous colleague or your resident spy? And exactly what am I supposed to have done with Mr. Szabo?"

She paused only long enough to draw breath, heard a sputtering noise from the other end of the line. Well, I've done it now. The thought was strangely liberating. "I'd like to hear the full indictment," she said. "And don't worry about my sensibilities. I'm familiar with most of those words." Her hand was shaking almost uncontrollably, but she knew her voice

was calm, precise, disdainful—the exact ancien régime hauteur, she realized, of *Maman* at her most impossible.

"The thing is, there's been another letter . . . ," he began.

My God, she thought, he's backing off. It was the moment to ease up. Instead she heard herself say, "Juicier than the first, I assume."

"That's not the point," he said.

"Then what is the point?" she demanded. "I can't be bothered responding to . . . to dreck like that."

"And I won't be addressed in that tone of voice," he growled. The line went dead.

I've been fired, she thought. Or have I? She sagged onto the couch. The handset began emitting a dial tone, and on the second try she managed to replace it without knocking the phone to the floor. "I need a drink," she said to the ashen face in the mirror. "A drink of some consequence."

She was in the kitchen, pouring a second slug of Armagnac into the glass that had held the first, when the doorbell rang. She was still so shaken that the sound didn't register until it rang again. She put her mouth to the wall speaker and yelled, "Who is it?"

The click of the downstairs speaker was followed by the usual barrage of street noises, perfectly rendered, and a garbled approximation of a human voice that might have said, "It's me: Eric."

She pressed the buzzer, heard the outside door open one flight down, heavy steps on the carpeted stairs. Automatically she took a second glass from the cupboard and filled it just as his knock echoed against the apartment door. She felt as if she were moving underwater as she stepped across the narrow hall, holding both glasses in one hand, and undid the chain and two bolts.

Eric loomed in the doorway, big as a bear in a ridiculous padded coat. Without thinking, she tilted her head to receive a kiss on the cheek. His response was so quick and natural that only his raised eyebrow betrayed his surprise. "Oh," she

said, "I didn't mean to . . ." Then she shook her head, perhaps to clear it, and handed him one of the two glasses. "Here."

He accepted the exquisite crystal container as if it were a ticking bomb. "Thanks, but I don't—"

"Of course you don't," she said, snatching the glass back and splashing half the contents over the back of her hand. "I'm sorry. What can I get you? Here, let me take your coat."

He was eyeing her strangely—and no wonder, she thought—as he wrestled himself free of it. "You all right?" he asked, holding it out to her.

No, I'm not all right. "Fine," she said, then realized she had a glass in each hand. "Oh, shit," she murmured, and emptied first one and then the other down her throat. The brandy seared all the way down, but it seemed to cut through some of the fog in her head. She took Eric's coat over her arm, said, "Be right back," and fled to the bedroom.

Tossing the coat on the big double bed, she consulted her reflection in the oval mirror. Her eyes were too bright, and she was still pale, and the alcohol had put two bright red spots in her cheeks. Right out of Madame Tussaud's, in fact.

"If I had to guess," Eric's voice called from the other end of the hall, "I'd say the Rajah just finished icing you down."

She almost lost it then—barely managed to swallow the white-hot lump rising in her throat. She set one of the brandy glasses on her dresser, felt the delicate stem snap in her fingers. Get a grip on yourself, Diana. "Very perceptive," she called back.

"Well, I've been on the receiving end myself." He sounded ruefully amused. "The first time's the worst."

She could feel her composure returning. "I'm not sure there's going to be a second," she said.

"If he didn't say 'I fire thee' three times, you're still employed," said Eric. "Assuming you want to be."

That was a question, too—but not one she felt capable of addressing now. At least you can face your guest, she told herself. Squaring her shoulders, she strode down the hall.

He was standing at the bookcase, surveying the shelves with what looked like genuine interest. "See anything you like?" she asked.

"Somebody told me once, the best way to read a person's character is from their books," he said.

"And what's your take on me?" she said, regretting the words almost before they were out of her mouth.

"It's blindingly obvious," he said. "You are a person who . . ." He waited a beat, grinning, and she tensed. "Who receives a lot of free books."

The ice between them had disappeared. Even without the coat, he's kind of like a bear, she thought. And I've always been partial to bears. "Strange, isn't it?" she said. "Half of these are meaningless freebies, but I can't bring myself to toss them out."

"I know what you mean." He pulled a volume from the shelf and opened it at random. "So you're off the case," he said, scanning a page.

"That was the order," she replied.

He shrugged, replaced the book. "Too bad," he said. "Are we permitted a sociable drink?"

He had that trick, she thought, of casually dropping an ambiguous line on you and then watching from the corner of his eye to see how you took it.

"You don't know much about the Rajah, do you?" he said, and she realized her silence had been an answer.

"Sometimes," she said cautiously, "that kind of knowledge can be expensive."

"Not as expensive as ignorance," he said. "Especially for someone in your position, with someone like him."

She had known from the beginning, of course—a woman always knew, and in any case the Rajah's reputation marched before him. But she thought he'd accepted her silent refusal of his unspoken offer. Now, it seemed, she had got it wrong. "It's hard to believe he could be jealous," she said.

"Thanks a lot."

Her cheeks, still warm from the brandy, went hot. "I only meant, considering all his opportunities."

Eric regarded her with laughter in his eyes. "Maybe it's just a fixation. Sooner or later, you were bound to meet a guy who had an uncontrollable passion for too tall autocratic ladies."

I thought I had. But I lost him.

He looked quickly away. "Put my foot in it," he said. "Sorry."

"This is ridiculous," she snapped. "Can you turn off that damned antenna of yours, so we can have an ordinary conversation?"

"About what?" he asked. His face was far too deadpan for innocence.

"Food," she replied evenly. "If this is our first and last dinner, I want to make it memorable."

"I'm easy," he said. "What's the *spécialité de la maison?*"

Diana considered the possibilities. While her trick metabolism allowed her to eat almost anything in unladylike quantities, her culinary repertoire had been conditioned by two factors—her own twelve-hour workday and Troubridge's asbestos palate. The oversize freezer in her kitchen was still half full of meals she had prepared for the two of them, meals they'd never had time to share.

"I forget the name," she said. "The active ingredients are jalapeños and garlic, with something inert to give it bulk."

"Oh." A fleeting, apprehensive smile. "Surprise me."

Chicken satay might be nice, she was thinking, and a cucumber raita to damp the flames. Maybe popovers on the side and a raspberry sherbet after. "All right. What I have in mind really calls for beer—"

"If you'll point me toward a deli," he cut in, "I'll handle that part."

* * *

They ate at the small, square parson's table in one corner of the living room. At first it seemed strange to look up and see,

instead of Troubridge's lean features, Eric's square, rugged face in the candles' glow. But he was an easy guest, equally ready with an attentive ear or a funny, self-deprecating anecdote, and only when they were well into the meal did Diana become aware of the delicate probing that he wove into his conversation.

You're very good indeed, she thought, deflecting another veiled question about her pre-Wild-Freeman past. *And I'm out of practice.* Even so, when it came to extracting information she had been trained by an expert—and old Dr. Fasolt's chief tenet was that you learned more from questions than you ever got from answers.

"But I really am interested," Eric was saying as he groped in the silver ice bucket and extracted another slender brown bottle. "You must have spent a lot of time in D.C. to know it so well—"

"Too much time."

"—and dislike it so much."

"It's a small-minded place," she said, looking past Eric into the shadows. "Run by self-important, hypocritical little men who see women as either slaves or whores." Startled at the venom in her own voice, she forced a smile. "I wasn't a great success in D.C."

"Nor was I, the couple of times I worked there," he said with a sour grin.

"Oh?"

"Done in by an overlubricated sense of humor," he replied, shutting down the subject. A long minute of silence. She could see in his face that he was searching for an opening into the subject of her marriage, and she was determined not to help him. He twisted the cap off the bottle he was holding and poured half the contents into his pewter mug. She said, "I see you're not absolute when it comes to alcohol."

"What?" His train of thought was clearly derailed, as she had intended. He looked at the bottle of Haake Beck as if seeing it for the first time. "Oh, that." Deliberately, he filled

the mug and took a long swallow, watching her over the rim as he drank. He set down the mug, said, "Half-of-one-percent near beer isn't my problem."

"What is?"

She was almost certain he was aware of what she was doing, but he appeared to consider her question seriously. "Boredom, aimlessness, self-disgust." He grimaced. "Let's talk about something else."

"All right," she said, and the decision made itself as she spoke. "What did you find out about our mystery woman?"

On his face, surprise and . . . what else? "I thought you weren't playing anymore."

"Listening isn't playing," she said, and saw he was tempted. "Telling me might help organize your thinking," she prompted.

He shrugged. "It's your funeral." And then the sudden, shy smile that must have got him into a hundred beds. "Okay, but most of this is very tenuous. First and foremost, friend Wahl was not the first man she's killed. . . ."

"What?" Diana had been ready for almost any revelation but that. "Who else?"

"My source wouldn't say." His eyes narrowed slightly. "He wouldn't tell me who she was, either—though he obviously knows. He didn't mean to let it slip about the first murder, but I got a strong sense that (a) it was recent and (b) it made the news."

"And (c) it hasn't been pinned on her?" Diana asked.

"Good point." Clearly, she thought, one that hadn't occurred to him. "I presume not."

The plastic bag full of woman's clothes. Now why had that popped into her head? She was still trying to see the connection when she became aware he had said something else, was waiting for her response. "Sorry, I was woolgathering," she said.

"The number Wahl mentioned—of the people our lady planned to blow away?"

"Five hundred and forty-six," she said. "What about it?"

Recently sodden clothes, her brain reminded her. That's important, too.

"I asked my source if the woman in question would be capable of knocking off that many people. He thinks she could."

"But does he think it's a real number? That's the important question." Or one of the three important questions, she corrected herself. The others being Who are the five hundred and forty-six and Are they a group or discrete individuals?

Eric nodded. "My source pooh-poohed it. But he's wondering, too."

It was time, she decided, to cut through some of the conversational haze: "I'm assuming your source is that odd little Mr. Plunkett."

"My former link to headquarters," he agreed. "And an old friend."

Diana remembered Plunkett from a couple of casual encounters and from his whispered nickname—the Fairy Godfather. There had been a time when she'd dismissed him as a fussy old maid who lived vicariously through his boss; now she found herself wondering if the same might not someday be true of Diana Speed.

"Word has it," she offered, "that one of Mr. Plunkett's roles is Leporello. . . ." She saw Eric groping for the reference and added: "To our leader's Don Juan."

"Bernie's not the Rajah's pimp, if that's what you mean," said Eric, clearly annoyed.

"Well, maybe closer to a Figaro," she said. "But my point remains: Mr. Plunkett handles highly personal matters for Himself."

"This is personal all right," said Eric. "I quote: 'She is more important to the Rajah than anyone else in the world.' And he wants her protected, not caught."

If you believed the gossip columns, Diana reflected, the most important woman in the Rajah's life this month was either the reigning queen of magazine editors or the recent

widow of an Asian dictator; neither seemed likely to have been involved with the late Harley Wahl. Past ladies—including at least one actual wife—were too numerous to count, but Diana found it nearly impossible to conceive of her employer being this concerned with the behavior of any former lover. If not a lover, then it almost had to be . . .

She emerged from her deliberation to see Eric watching her intently. She could almost feel him willing her to speak. "I have the feeling we're at the edge of a large minefield," she said. "And I'm not sure there's anything on the far side that makes the trip across worthwhile."

"For you, definitely not," he said firmly. "Even if you wanted to, I wouldn't let you get any more involved."

Let? She stiffened, and the words *Who the hell do you think you are?* were on her lips, when she saw the other possibility. She wondered if her smile looked as fradulent as it felt. "That's very considerate, Eric. But what's in this for you?"

25. Szabo

He was jolted. He'd been prepared for a blaze of anger—ready to guide it and her in the direction he intended. Instead she was going to walk obediently away from the case. Or was she? Certainly that was a very ambivalent half smile on her face.

"What's in this for me?" he repeated slowly. "I guess it's my road back—and a shortcut, if I can pull it off."

She lifted her glass to her lips, never taking her eyes from his, and took a measured sip. "You know what they say about shortcuts: the longest road in the end."

She was wearing a plain white blouse, open at the throat, and dark slacks. No jewelry on her long-fingered, perfect hands. The color had returned to her face, and her smile spread, softening the wide mouth and warming the blue-gray eyes. Her skin didn't need more than the touch of makeup she wore; didn't need candlelight, either, though the gentle glow did seem to subdue her usual hawklike intensity. This isn't the Snow Queen they talk about at Wild-Freeman, he thought. Artemis at rest, maybe. And then: This is what she looks like after making love.

"What's the matter? Is the satay too hot?" she asked. Her smile had frozen, and he realized some of his feelings must have shown.

"No, no—it's wonderful," he said, though his tongue felt scorched. He shook himself mentally. This was not a woman you could take for granted—not for an instant. "Look, Diana," he began, feeling his way, "if I said I was going to put all my cards on the table"—he saw the answer in her eyes—"you'd assume I was about to tell you a major whopper."

A cool smile. "That's what usually follows, yes."

But he had her attention, and her interest. "Then I'll just have to hope for the best," he said, reaching into his back pocket. "How's this for starters?" He tossed the wallet across the narrow table; it landed with the bloodstain up, an inch from her fingertips.

He saw that she recognized it. So she had seen him take it from Wahl's body. Deliberately she extended her forefinger and tipped it over, hiding the dark splotch. "Anything interesting inside?" she asked.

"A hundred and fifty-three dollars," Eric said. "Social Security card, cash register receipts from a grocery, two bits of plastic that looked like credit cards but weren't. And three photos—of the owner."

"She wouldn't have given him her picture," Diana murmured.

"Why not?" Eric demanded.

"I don't know," she said, looking slightly puzzled. "But she wouldn't have." She shook her head. "What were those bits of plastic?"

"Donor card from a blood bank, in the name of W. A. Harley, and an ID issued by something called the National Veterans Insurance Plan to Harley A. Wahl."

"National Veterans Insurance?" she said. "Sounds like a scam to me."

"Oh, it is," Eric agreed. "But they get their mailing list

from military discharge records. Harley was in the army at some point."

"Why not the navy, or the air force?" she asked, and, as he pulled the envelope from his short pocket, added: "You notice I fed you the right line."

He grinned, tossed her the bent and faded photo. "The other two looked like wallet-size versions of stock publicity shots. . . ."

"Brick Wahl, actor."

"Right. This one, on the other hand, is a real snapshot."

She flattened the print on the tablecloth, moved the candle next to it. "My God, he looks good enough to eat," she remarked absently. "In a manner of speaking," she added a second later. She looked up. "What does this tell us?"

"It doesn't tell *me* a whole lot," said Eric. "The uniform is U.S. Army, and the badge is specialist fourth class, whatever that means. The background shrubbery looks like eastern U.S., and his fatigues have creases in them, so I'm betting the shot was taken at an army post."

"Not bad for a first pass," she said. "You were in naval intelligence before the Rajah snapped you up. Do you have any old buddies from the army equivalent?"

"Too long ago," he replied, thinking, This is the tricky part. "I was kind of hoping you might supply the old-buddy element, from your time in D.C. Someone who could get into the army's personnel records."

"Washington," she said thoughtfully. I said something wrong. But what? "We'll see."

She was waiting, he saw. Not yet ready to reciprocate. "The other card's interesting, too," he offered, and could feel a tiny, responding warmth.

"My first thought was that he was selling his blood," she said. "He was an actor, and they're usually broke."

"My first thought, too," Eric said. "I wonder if our second thoughts were the same: trade a pint for a free blood test."

"Hence the phony name," Diana put in. "He was doing

something that put him at risk of AIDS, and he needed to prove to someone that he was clean."

"He hadn't been doing it recently, though," said Eric. "I wasn't looking for needle marks, but I'd have seen them if they'd been there."

Now it was his turn to wait. She was weighing her tactics, he guessed, but there was some other hesitation, too. Finally she pushed back her chair. "Just a moment," she said.

When she returned she had the Armagnac bottle in one hand and in the other a brown paper bag that held a more or less tubular object. Without speaking, eyes averted, she poured herself a stiff brandy and drank half of it. After setting down the glass, she lifted the bag. On the point of emptying it, she glanced up at Eric.

Shamefaced amusement, he was thinking as she upended the bag. "Goodness me," he said into the echoing silence.

Her ears were scarlet, but her voice was dry. "It's battery powered," she said. "The main part vibrates, and the little thing on the side sort of wriggles."

"Does it indeed."

"I found it under one corner of the Hide-A-Bed," she said. "The batteries were flat—maybe it died in action, and one of them threw it down."

"Or maybe it crawled there to perish in privacy," he said, picking the thing up. He switched it on. "Must be some kind of eccentric," he said after a few seconds. "I mean the gear that drives the small arm," he added, seeing her expression. He pushed the switch to off. "Do you suppose that's why she shot him? Wahl forced her to submit—"

"No!" Her vehemence surprised her, he saw, as much as it did him. "You heard Wahl on the phone," she continued more evenly. "He was terrified of her. She may be a little kinky—"

Just a little, he thought, setting the device gently on the table.

"—but they're her kinks, not anyone else's," she finished,

and downed the rest of her brandy. She glared at him. "You need me to help you untangle this," she snapped.

It was more than he'd expected, if not the relationship he'd hoped for. "I do," he agreed.

She picked up the snapshot, inspected it instead of looking at Eric. "I need your help, too," she said.

He knew what she wanted. "I'll find him, your anonymous letter writer."

"No, no," she said, getting to her feet. "I know who he is. I just need to straighten him out."

He was standing, too, and they were only a foot apart, nearly eye to eye. Her perfume was like her, he thought—subtle, astringent, complex. He wanted desperately to take her in his arms, and he sensed her need for him, equally strong. She was going to dismiss him, though. And she was right.

"Shall I drop this in the trash outside?" he asked, picking up the vibrator.

"That sounds like a good idea," she said. "Thanks."

Not until he was standing outside on the sidewalk, feeling the chill come up through the soles of his shoes, did he realize that he'd gone through two whole hours without even thinking about booze. And the funny thing is, he felt more than a little high.

26. Magdalen

Delta Airlines Flight 1661; 4:55 p.m. Thursday

Magdalen surfaced from an uneasy doze, her hands gripping the armrests. The plane felt as if it were losing altitude, and she looked quickly out the window beside her. No obvious sign of doom—the wing was still attached, the engine was still roaring—and merciful cloud concealed the ground below. God, she hated flight: it was so damned unconvincing.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the Goddess Saccharine, "we are beginning our descent into Salt Lake City. Captain Ryder has illuminated the Fasten Seat Belts sign . . ."

At Magdalen's side, Kenny was still asleep, as he had been since shortly after they'd left Chicago. Under the airline's thin blue blanket he was swaddled to the chin in a heavy overcoat, and a fur-lined cap with the earflaps down was jammed on his head. Suddenly his eyes were open, watching her. His dark face was gleaming with sweat.

"We're coming to Salt Lake City," she said. "Aren't you melting?"

"Part of me is," he said. "Down inside, I just can't get warm the way I used to."

He wouldn't say any more about what was wrong with him. Night before last, when he'd moved her into his austere apartment just off Queens Boulevard, she'd made a point of surveying the contents of the medicine cabinet in his tiny bathroom. No less than fifteen prescription vials filled its shelves, and some of the capsules and tablets were familiar to her—heavy-duty painkillers and sleep inducers. Several were out of her experience, and she had memorized the names for later research.

This morning he'd shaken her awake at an obscenely early hour. "Rise and shine, Magdalen. Time's a-wasting."

She rolled over, saw he was already dressed. "What's happening, Top?" she asked, pulling herself upright. The sheet slipped from her bare breasts, as she intended, but he ignored it.

"We're making a little trip," he said.

Her own suitcases, the matched set of Vuitton rip-offs, were still in a row in the living room, unopened. "What do I take?" she asked, barely half awake.

"Just what you need for three nights," he said. "Three nights on the road. And lots of money."

Something electric in his voice caught her attention. "We're off to see the wizard. Aren't we?"

"You might say," he replied, pulling open a drawer. "Now, get that luscious ass in gear. Magdalen Tyrrell's got places to go and people to see."

They took the subway into Manhattan, where she went to the bank and closed out her account while Kenny waited outside. From there they walked down to Grand Central and caught the airport bus back out to La Guardia. At the American Airlines counter, Kenny bought two one-way tickets on the noon flight to Chicago and paid cash, giving names that were not their own. "No thanks," he told the ticket agent. "We'll carry the suitcase."

Hurrying after him to the departure gate, Magdalen said, "We're spending the night in Chicago?"

He grinned over his shoulder. "Nope," he said. At that moment she caught sight through a window of a jet rolling by outside. A wave of terror drove all questions from her head. By the time they got to the gate, her heart was pounding and the handle of her overnight bag was slippery.

On the ground at O'Hare, Magdalen was still giving thanks for having cheated death again when she found herself in a cab, heard Kenny giving the name of a hotel in the Loop. They went through the hotel's lobby and out a side door, two blocks down Michigan Avenue, where he flagged another taxi. "O'Hare, my man," he said. "American Airlines departures." His eyes warned her not to ask questions.

On the curb at O'Hare, he watched the cab scuttle off. "Okay," he said. "Let's move out." He must have seen the rebellion in her eyes. "I'll tell you while we walk."

"Walk where?" she demanded.

"Delta," he said. "Come on.

"We just buried Magdalen Tyrrell," he said, speaking low and fast. "From what ol' Harley told me, he and Magdalen were a regular number, and for quite a while. So when the cops find Harley, pretty soon they'll come looking for Magdalen. One thing the boys in blue start with is that nine times out of ten a person gets killed by their nearest and dearest."

She had known that, had read it somewhere. A statistic of modern life. Never had she thought it would connect to her. And then without warning she saw old Fielding as she had left him, a shapeless bundle wedged against the wall of a cheap restaurant. No nearest and dearest in that one. Nor in the far greater project she was embarked upon.

Kenny took her arm. "That's the bad news," he said. "You want to hear the other side?"

"Why not?" she said.

"The best thing is, more important men than Harley get killed in the Big Apple every day. NYPD will go through

the motions, but their hearts won't be in it. Chances are they'll never track you even to La Guardia. But suppose they get lucky. Suppose the American Airlines gal remembers the sexy redhead who went to Chicago with the dark-skinned guy—could've been a nigger—who didn't look so healthy."

From the moment they had met, she had wondered off and on about his color, but he never referred to it. Maybe he could tell it heightened her interest in him. He was watching her sidelong now, and she knew he had laid it on her to see her reaction. "What happens then?" she asked.

"They check the cabs. If they do, there's an off chance they track us to the hotel, but there the trail dies. What's important is that you look like somebody who came to Chicago, not like somebody on their way to Salt Lake City."

"Salt Lake City?" she'd said. "Why in God's name would anybody go there?"

"Because Utah's next door to Colorado," he said. "Come on: we're late."

* * *

At the Delta counter they bought tickets separately—both one-way to Salt Lake, both for cash, both under new names. (In a moment of whimsy, Magdalen settled on Becky Sharp.) The plane was barely half full, and they had no trouble sitting together. When the cart came by with drinks, Magdalen ordered two Scotches; Kenny settled for water and proceeded to swallow selections from an assortment of pills he was carrying, loose, in his coat pocket. In a matter of minutes he was asleep.

* * *

He turned to her now and said, "You want to hear a story?"

How far down can this thing drop before it hits something? she was wondering. A Rocky Mountain, or one of those damn Mormon temples? "Only if it has a happy ending," she said.

"Hasn't got an ending," he said. "But it's true."

He was going to tell it anyway, she saw. "Go ahead."

"Behind us someplace, down on the deck," he said, nodding toward the window, "there's a place called the Tooele Army Depot, where they used to stockpile different kinds of artillery shells. A lot of 'em were nerve gas. Mostly for the one fifty-five howitzer, but also a batch of experimental rounds for the four-deuce mortar—stuff called sarin."

Phosphine oxide, she thought. Also known as GB. The book on poison gas in the New York Public Library had devoted several paragraphs to sarin, and Magdalen remembered every word: odorless, absorbed through the skin and eyes as well by inhaling, it attacked the central nervous system. In concentrations of only seventy parts per million, it was fatal in less than half an hour. "Are those shells still there?" she asked.

"Not exactly," he replied. He chuckled softly. "Back around 1978, the government decided poison gas wasn't nice anymore. The order went out to send the sarin shells to Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Denver, to be neutralized. But when they were packing 'em up at Tooele, guess what?"

He had her full attention now. "What?" she said.

"Two dozen of the mortar rounds turned out to be dummies—practice projectiles, like the two we fired off yesterday—but painted with sarin markings."

"You mean someone had stolen the real ones and replaced them with fakes?"

"Only a nasty, suspicious mind would think that," he said, deadpan. "The depot commander told Washington the original invoices were wrong: the missing shells never existed, but when the count came up short, one of his men panicked and faked the inventory to make it agree with the paperwork."

"Instead of just checking? You're not serious," she said.

"You just don't understand the military mind," he answered. "Paperwork wins over reality every time."

Magdalen was still shaking her head in disbelief when she saw the point of Kenny's anecdote. "Those nonexistent mortar rounds . . . ," she began.

"Sometimes reality bites back."

* * *

In the airport cafeteria, Magdalen took a piece of rubbery-looking lemon pie from the shelf and poured herself a cup of burned coffee. "D'you see him?" she murmured to Kenny at her side.

"Nope." He seemed unperturbed. "But I bet he's watching us." He sniffed her coffee, shook his head sadly, and fished a container of milk from its bed of cracked ice. He led the way to a corner table with three chairs. "Put your bag there," he told her.

She had barely sat down when a large man loomed over them. "Howdy, friends," he said. "In from the East?" A department store Santa without the beard, she thought: round and rosy and benevolent. Even had a red jacket. Only the eyes were wrong for the part—small and closely set, moving constantly, as coldly observant as the TV camera in a bank.

"Just passing through," said Kenny. "Why don't you join us?"

"Believe I might," the man said. He set down the tray he was carrying. His coffee smelled fresh to Magdalen, and she wondered if they saved fresh coffee for the locals. "Name's Roscoe," he was saying to Kenny. "Roscoe Humm, but this being the West, everybody calls me Roscoe."

"Clayton G. Abrams," said Kenny, holding out his hand. "But I don't really give a damn what you call me. You recognize my voice, right?"

Roscoe's mouth smiled at Magdalen. "You don't mind if I set your bag down on the floor, do you, honey?" He lowered himself onto the plastic chair, which flexed under his weight. To Kenny he said, "You don't look like I thought you would. You sick or something?"

"I've been better," said Kenny. "My money's healthy as hell."

Without changing expression, Roscoe barked sharply. Magdalen decided it was meant as laughter. "Never heard of sick

money," he said. "Now, I understand you're looking for something pretty special in the way of fireworks."

"Four-deuce projectiles," said Kenny, sounding bored. "With the EXP markings, and the yellow bands."

"Oh, *those*." Roscoe's cold eyes scanned the room, settled back on Kenny. "Don't know if I have any more of those," he said. "How about AP or HE?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "Might have a couple of CK's for the one fifty-five."

"No," Kenny replied. "GB's what we want. The experimental rounds for the four-deuce."

"GB, that's tough stuff," Roscoe said unhappily. "You know what that does to people?"

"Kills them," said Kenny.

"Sure, but do you know *how* it kills them?" He widened his eyes dramatically, and Magdalen had the sense of looking the wrong way into an open camera lens. "I couldn't decribe it in front of a lady."

"That's very sweet of you," said Magdalen. "Let me try: First you start to sweat, and you can't seem to catch your breath. Your vision gets cloudy, and your head starts to ache. You're drooling a little, and you have trouble keeping track of what's going on around you." Roscoe's cherubic face had turned to stone, and now Magdalen could see fright and greed behind his little eyes. She locked on them and continued: "You almost fall asleep, but all of a sudden you're vomiting, and your stomach cramps up, and your bladder lets go, and your sphincter, too."

She leaned forward, crooning softly: "But by now you're down on the floor, rolling around in it and twitching. Pretty soon you go into full-scale convulsions, but by then you don't care, because you're sliding into a coma. Your lungs become paralyzed, and then your heart stops." She sat back on her chair, regarded Roscoe's horrified face with satisfaction.

Beside her, Kenny chuckled and said, "We want ten, but we'll settle for six. Twenty-five hundred apiece, half now, half on delivery."

Roscoe shook himself like a wet dog. "Twenty-five? What do you think these are—grenade simulators?" He was clearly shaken, and Magdalen sensed that his attempt at indignation was strictly pro forma.

"No," Kenny said gently. "I think these are so hot you ought to pay us to haul 'em away. Twenty-seven fifty: take it or leave it."

In the end he took it, as Magdalen had known he would. (Privately she thought she could have held him at twenty-five.) Pickup would be in the morning, at a side road off the Provo bypass of U.S. 15.

She was counting out the hundreds, under the edge of the table, when Roscoe said, "I don't know what you want these for, and I don't want to know. But one thing I got to be sure of."

"What's that?" said Kenny.

"I want your promise, your sacred word, that you're not going to use this stuff on American boys," he said. "I mean that."

Kenny's face was so rigid that Magdalen knew he was about to laugh out loud. She leaned forward again, and Roscoe flinched away from her. "Mr. Humm," she said, "I can give you that promise. And let me say how heartening it is to find a patriot of your caliber these days."

"It is?" said Roscoe.

"Absolutely," she replied, thinking, as she continued, lights up, drumroll, and "Halls of Montezuma" louder behind: "Your contribution this afternoon will mean hope and freedom for an embattled people too long trampled by tyranny. Mr. Humm"—her voice dropped again, and he swayed forward helplessly—"do you know the name Saddam Hussein?"

"Son of a bitch," gasped Roscoe Humm.

"Zap," said Magdalen.

27. Kenny

New Zion Roadside Motel, Lehi, Utah; 7:00 a.m. Friday

When he toppled into the sagging motel double, he was already feeling twinges—as if the marrow in his bones were on fire—and by dawn the pain was so bad that he had to bite down on a mouthful of scuzzy pillow to keep from groaning. The bed had a deep, combat-induced valley in the middle, and Magdalen's soft, hot, unconscious form had rolled down against his side. She hadn't dropped off to sleep till two, wound up like a spring after their meeting with Roscoe Humm.

Sex might have eased her, might have eased them both, but Kenny hadn't dared think about it. He was running on empty, and he sensed there wasn't going to be a refill this time.

She was a pistol, no question. The most exciting woman he'd ever met. And the hardest to figure. He wanted desperately to stretch out their hours together, knew it was hopeless: if you wanted to be with Magdalen Tyrrell, you had to fly at her speed—and take the consequences.

He was starting to shake again. It'd been happening often in the last few days, but he could more or less hide it when he had his clothes on. Moving slowly, painfully, he pulled himself out of the bed. He straightened up too fast, had a quick moment of giddiness. That's a new one, he thought. Not good.

He made it into the bathroom, kicked the thin door closed with his heel before the retching started. When it was done, he looked at his torso in the mirror, shook his head. He didn't need a scale to tell him he was starting to lose weight. That was the bad sign: they all said so. Well, before he checked out he would by God make sure Magdalen had her big bang. And maybe—just maybe—he'd live long enough to see it.

* * *

"Here," he said, handing her the cardboard box. "Blow this up about halfway, while I drive."

She looked concerned. "Is the seat too hard? Are you okay, Top?"

He forced a laugh. "They don't call it Rent-A-Wreck for nothing, do they?" he said. "But the air mattress isn't for me."

After a second she got it. "You mean those shells might explode if they get bumped?" He watched her face become suddenly thoughtful. But not frightened.

"When the army moves this kind of ordnance from place to place," he said, "it cuts special movement orders—smooth roads, no cities or towns on the route, new suspensions in the trucks, guard vehicles front and rear. And the convoy moves about thirty miles an hour."

"Oh," she said. After a minute she began to smile. "And we've got to be back east by Monday—twenty-five hundred miles in a beat-up station wagon with sixty-three thousand miles on it. Bad shocks and a ten-dollar air mattress to pad the load. I love it."

"Free enterprise," Kenny said absently. "Listen, you really mean that about being back east three days from now?"

"Absolutely," she said.

She was not, he saw, ready to tell him the rest. Well, it could slide a little longer. Besides, there was something more urgent: "You know, there's a good chance Roscoe may try to pull a fast one."

She wasn't surprised, he saw. God, what a woman. "How do we handle it?" she said.

* * *

In the back of Roscoe's pickup, under a lashed-down tarp, the two crates were resting uneasily on a water-bed mattress, about half full. The crates were labeled *Genuine MerCruiser Outdrive The Marine Industry Standard*. "I boxed 'em myself," said Roscoe Humm. "Figured you might not want to advertise the cargo."

"Well, you can unbox 'em yourself," Kenny said. "I want to see what we're paying for." He looked hard into Roscoe's dead eyes, willing the other man to match him stare for stare.

At last Roscoe shrugged. "Try and do a favor," he muttered, but Kenny saw he'd half expected it. The big man went to the cab of his pickup, fumbled under the front seat. Kenny tensed: there were two high-powered rifles in a rack across the cab's rear window, but they didn't preclude Roscoe having some small-caliber insurance, too. Making sure the other man saw him do it, Kenny shifted the bulging brown manila envelope to his left hand, slid his right into his coat pocket, grasping the flat half-pint of Night Train so the neck of the bottle was outlined against the cloth.

"Easy, my friend," said Roscoe. Moving slowly, he pulled out a pry bar, held it in both hands for Kenny's inspection.

Kenny nodded toward the back of the pickup, and Roscoe led the way. "So your hard-ass lady friend decided not to come," Roscoe observed. "She sleeping in?"

"A hard night at the no-tell motel," Kenny agreed, not taking his eyes off the other man.

Roscoe's tight mouth stretched in acknowledgment. "You'll have to give me a hand," he said, laying the pry bar on the ground.

Kenny nodded. The air was cold and clean and still; listening hard, he could just hear the soft rumble of traffic on U.S. 15, two miles away. Around them the gaunt, yellow-brown hillsides looked bare—though you could, Kenny knew, hide a company of sharpshooters among those rocks with no trouble at all. Behind him, from the station wagon, his ears caught the faint metallic squeak of an unoiled door hinge; he took a quick step forward, noisily grinding his boot into the gritty dirt. "Let's do it," he said, setting the envelope down between his feet.

Roscoe climbed into the back of the truck, standing awkwardly with his feet jammed between the metal sides and the edges of the water-bed mattress. He eased open the crates, using the pry bar with a gentleness that would have looked funny under different circumstances. Each crate seemed at first to be filled with peanut-shaped bits of plastic. When Roscoe brushed them aside, Kenny saw the unmarked cardboard tubes, four in each case, lying in pairs. The tubes had recessed metal caps, and Kenny could see no sign of tampering. "Get 'em down on the ground," he said.

Roscoe rolled his eyes upward. With exaggerated care, he lifted one of the cardboard tubes and handed it to Kenny, who laid it gently on the gritty earth. When all eight cylinders were in a neat row, and Roscoe had lowered himself off the truck, Kenny pointed to the second tube from the end. "Let's see that one."

Roscoe ran his tongue along the underside of his mustache. The sweat was shining on his forehead. He levered the cap from the tube, set down the pry bar, and slid the projectile slowly out, tail first. Kenny regarded it for a moment. Eight square-tipped fins, brightly polished aluminum, and a rounded nose with a twist-to-on arming fuse, also shiny metal. In

between, the projectile's cylindrical body was painted dull black, so that the bright yellow stenciled lettering seemed to jump off the casing:

EXP
107 M/M
GB CHEM
SHELL
MK 2
EXP

"Don't worry: they're real," said Roscoe into the silence. "Too damn real," he added a second later. "Tell you the truth, I'll be goddamn glad to see the last of 'em."

Kenny bent forward, surprised at his own reluctance to touch the thing. The casing was cold to his fingertips—but what else would it be? He hefted the shell, heard the breath hiss between Roscoe's clenched teeth.

"Looks okay," Kenny said. The arming switch was still coated with Cosmoline, and the grease gleamed in the thin sunlight. He turned the switch, felt the click as it armed.

"Hey!" cried Roscoe. "Watch it, man!" His eyes were wide with fear.

Kenny forced a smile. "Here, catch," he said, making as if to toss the shell to the other man.

Roscoe, his face gray, tried to step backward, but his feet tangled. His arms milled the air helplessly, and at the last moment he grabbed the side of the truck. "Jesus H. Christ," he said as the color rushed back into his cheeks. "You're crazy as a bedbug, fooling with that thing. What the hell you trying to do?"

"Make sure it's real," said Kenny. He disarmed it, slid it gently back into its cardboard tube. "And now I'm pretty sure it is."

"Yeah, well, now I want to see some real cash," Roscoe said belligerently.

"Fair enough," Kenny replied. He picked up the envelope, undid the metal clasp, and upended it onto the pickup's lowered tailgate. Pale green stacks slid out, fluttering. As Roscoe watched, his eyes suddenly alive, Kenny arranged the rubber-banded packets in a precise line, dressed right and faces up. Eleven Benjamin Franklins stared at the pale blue sky. "All used hundreds, twenty to a stack," said Kenny. "Count 'em if you want."

"Take your word for it," said Roscoe. His right hand was in his own coat pocket now. "Then there's tax," he said, smiling. "I figure it comes to fifty-five hundred."

Kenny locked his gaze on Roscoe's face, forced himself not to look past the other man. "How d'you figure that?"

Roscoe shrugged. "You were ready to buy ten of these puppies, at twenty-seven fifty per. Live and learn, my friend."

Kenny stood easily, keeping both his hands in sight. He glanced deliberately at the rear window of the truck, and Roscoe's eyes followed his. Only one rifle was in the rack now. "Live and learn," Kenny said quietly.

Roscoe's smile congealed. "You son of a—"

His lips were just shaping *bitch* when he heard the hoarse double click behind him. The sun winked off a cartridge casing as it spun out of the breech, hit the ground.

Magdalen was barefoot, legs braced apart, no more than ten feet behind Roscoe. Her eyes were slitted against the sun, and the lever-action thirty-thirty was pointed right at the small of his back.

* * *

"Why didn't you let me shoot him?" she said. "He would've killed you."

Ahead of the station wagon, U.S. 15 unrolled as smooth and shiny as electrical tape. Kenny flexed his fingers on the steering wheel; he estimated another half hour before the painkillers made him too woozy to drive. He considered Magdalen's question. "What would we do with the body?" he asked after

a minute. "That's about two hundred and twenty pounds of dead meat, not to mention his pickup."

"Put him in his truck and drop a lighted match in the gas tank," she shot back.

He shook his head, but he couldn't help grinning. "The thing about Roscoe," he said, "is that he's the kind of guy might be more trouble dead than alive."

"Explain."

She always wanted to know: it was one of the things he liked the most about her, but it sure could wear you out. "Okay," he said, arranging his train of thought, "the way we left it, Roscoe's out of action for at least half a day: without the distributor cap, that pickup's going no place, and from where we left him, he'll have to walk at least five miles before he's got a chance of thumbing a ride. He's out of the picture, as far as we're concerned."

"How can you say that?" she demanded. "We've got his . . . merchandise, we took our money back, we even stole his pistol and smashed his two rifles. If I were him, I'd—"

"But he's *not* you," Kenny interrupted, laughing. "Hell, nobody is. Look," he continued, "Roscoe gambled and lost. In his business, that kind of thing happens. My guess is that he's happy to have those GB shells off his back. He'll write it off—you take my word for it."

"Maybe," she said. But he could see she wasn't convinced. "I still think it would've been safer to shoot him."

"Wrong," Kenny said flatly. "Look, Roscoe's been in this racket a long time, and you know why? Because somebody up there likes him."

"What?"

Her incredulous expression told Kenny she had misunderstood him. "Not up *there*," he said, lifting an index finger off the wheel and pointing it skyward. "In the government." She was following him now, he saw; nodded for him to continue. "I haven't done much business with Roscoe myself, but I know a fair number of guys who have. As long as they sell him

penny-ante stuff, they're safe. A case of grenades, no problem: the deal goes down without a ripple. But if they get bigger ideas—and sooner or later they always do—then the roof falls in. Same goes for the dudes who buy from Roscoe."

"He's a sort of decoy, you mean."

"Kind of," Kenny agreed. "I mean, what do the feds care about a few more old army forty-fives floating around, when they can use Roscoe to keep tabs on the really heavy-duty stuff?"

He could see the objection in her eyes, but he went on: "Thing is, if anything terminal should happen to Roscoe, it won't be just the Provo, Utah, police who take an interest."

"I can see that," she said slowly. "But it seems to me that what we've got in back is about as heavy-duty as it gets. Won't his selling us those shells make the roof fall in on our heads?"

"Nope," said Kenny, pleased that she saw what he was talking about. And even more pleased that there was something else he could teach her. "Those experimental shells are over the top for Roscoe or anybody else. If the feds knew he had those things in his stock, he'd be out of business toot sweet—and he's had them for quite a while."

"So he keeps a few secrets of his own," she said.

Kenny could see the next question coming, and he answered it while it was still taking shape in her head: "Can you imagine that great, big dork going to the FBI—hell, going to anybody—and telling them he was hijacked . . . by a woman?"

She was laughing, too. A warm, soft laughter that sent prickles up his back. But then the hawk soaring in high circles ahead of them split into a pair, coalesced, and split again, and Kenny pulled the station wagon gently to the side of the road, keeping the wheels on the asphalt. "Time to switch drivers," he said.

* * *

"Top," she said about thirty minutes later, "the signs keep saying Fifteen South. How come we're going south, when we want to go east?"

"Because it's January, sweetheart," he said without opening his eyes. "We don't want to take a chance in those mountains this time of year." He could feel the sweat running down his back, soaking through the coat. "We'll go south into Nevada, as far as Vegas, then hang a left on Ninety-three and cut across the south end of Lake Mead till we pick up U.S. Forty East, just outside Kingman, Arizona."

He could almost hear her working it out. "It'll mean some fancy driving," she said at last. "But I can do it."

"I'll be able to spell you a little," he offered. "But I'm assuming you want to save me for later."

"You're a good man, Top," she said. "The best I've . . ." Her voice started to break, and she paused. She was back under control when she spoke again. "Tonight," she said. "I'll tell you the whole thing tonight."

"It's a date," he replied.

28. Diana

East 43rd Street and Madison Avenue; noon Friday

"You've got some nerve, girl." The voice at the other end of the phone line was warmly amused. "Calling a U.S. government employee during lunch hour." At Diana's back, a taxi horn blared. "And from a pay phone in the street, 'less my ears deceive me. What's happening?"

"I need some information, Xenie," she said.

"No problem, darlin'," said the voice. "Long as you're not planning to overthrow the Republic."

"Not this week," Diana replied, trying to keep her tone equally light. "The thing is, my question's really in Woody's bailiwick."

She could almost hear her oldest friend hesitating, weighing: it was only natural, and on two counts—Xenia Dawkins had spent nearly fifteen years in the mirror maze of intelligence, where every commitment had a betrayal built into it; and her husband, Colonel Woodrow Wilson Dawkins, was just now especially vulnerable, at the precarious break point of his army career.

"It's not a big deal," said Diana. "I'd ask Woody myself, only I don't want him getting the call at work."

"And you don't want prying ears to hear it, either," said Xenie, her voice suddenly cool. "What makes you think my phone's clean?"

"I'm assuming it's not," Diana said. "But what I need really is innocent—just a venial bureaucratic sin."

"Darlin', this is the District of Columbia you're talking to," said Xenie, warm again. "Venial's part of our area code. Let's have it."

"I need the army personnel records on one Harley Joshua Wahl—W-A-H-L," Diana said. "Probably left the service two, three years ago. An enlisted man, and most likely never got above E-4."

"E-4?" Xenie said incredulously. "A corporal? Have they got you vetting office boys, honey?"

Diana ignored her. There was one other possibility, a long shot, triggered by her memory of an old anecdote Woody used to tell. . . . "Xenie, isn't 'Top' a standard nickname in the army?"

"Sure, but not for corporals," Xenie shot back. "It's short for 'top soldier'—first sergeant, sergeant major. Still not exactly in your league."

"Okay," Diana said quickly. When luck turns with you, get behind it and push. "Then would you ask Woody to check for a first sergeant that Wahl served with, a man whose first name is Kenny or Kenneth?"

"His records, too?" asked Xenie.

"Please. But his current address would be even better. And I need this in a hurry."

"Someday," said Xenie, "prob'ly just before I retire, a person's going to ask me for something, and they're going to say, 'Take your time, girl. There is absolutely no rush on this.' "

"Monday," said Diana.

"I will do my best," Xenie said. "And since my husband

is still passionately in love with you, you may just get it Monday. Now, where do you want me to fax the stuff?"

It was a question Diana had been brooding over all morning: by now, she assumed, both her home and business telephones were being tapped. And any communication with Harley Wahl's name in it was going to ring alarm bells all through the Rajah's security network. The answer had surfaced reluctantly, and she grimaced as she gave it: "My sister has a fax machine on her home phone. It's a Connecticut number—203-555-1190. I'll tell her to expect your call."

"I didn't think you and your sister were even speaking," Xenie said.

"We're speaking," Diana replied. "When we've got something to say."

"Sounds to me like you're in deep doo-doo, as our last peerless leader was wont to exclaim."

"Deep enough," Diana replied. "Her name is Louise, by the way."

"Got it. And you owe me one, darlin'."

In for a penny, in for a pound, Diana thought. "Actually, I was planning to owe you two."

"Speak."

"I've had somebody—an employee—wished on me. He used to be in your community, on the water side. Can you run a little check on him for me?"

"So that's why you're makin' your calls from the middle of the street," Xenie said. She sounded interested. "How long ago was he one of us?"

"According to his résumé, he left the ranks in 1974, as a lieutenant. Name is Eric Szabo—S-Z-A-B-O."

"O," Xenie repeated. "As in Oscar de la Renta. What exactly do you want to know about him?"

What he's like in bed. The thought had come arrowing straight up from the depths of her subconscious with such force that the words were on her lips before she pulled them back. Instead she managed after a second or two to say, "Why

he left the service. Any MO, special talents, weaknesses—that kind of thing."

"Where to place the knife, in other words," said Xenie. "Shouldn't be too hard—the projects he was working on are old enough to be desensitized, and what do lieutenants know, anyway? I'll fax whatever I can find along with the other stuff."

"That report I don't want in writing," Diana said quickly. "I'll call you this time Monday."

Xenie's silence told Diana she'd said too much. And like everyone who'd said too much, she had to fight back the urge to say more. After a long five seconds Xenie said, "You hear anything from that Englishman of yours?"

"Nothing. And I don't want to, Xenie."

"Whatever you say, honey. But—"

"Talk to you Monday, darlin'," said Diana. "Love to Woody." She hung up with unnecessary firmness. Looking around the sides of the open phone booth, she caught sight of a pair of familiar broad shoulders on the far side of East 43rd street and an even more familiar head of blond hair alongside: Eric and Joy Summer. Well, it was a free country. But Joy, like most Californians Diana had met, possessed little guile and less reserve. It would take Eric about five minutes to find out everything Joy knew about Diana—or thought she knew. Luckily it wasn't much.

Now the other call. Before I change my mind. Again she weighed the wisdom of using her charge card and came up with the same answer: The chances of the Rajah's people picking off her phone charges as they came through were too slight to bother with.

"Hello?"

Well bred, shy, gentle: the voice was the woman, Diana thought. "Hello, Louise. It's me," she said.

"Diana. How nice." Cool acknowledgment, as taught at Miss Porter's. "Did you have a pleasant Christmas?"

"Fine. Listen, Louise, I'm sorry to bother you—"

"It's no bother, Diana." Gentle, but there was iron under

there someplace. Even ten years of marriage to tomcat Harold Briskett hadn't leached that away. "The children loved your presents, by the way."

"I got their thank-you notes. Very impressive," Diana said. "I'm calling because . . ." She steadied herself. "Because I need your help."

"Of course."

No dithering, no questions. She is in many ways a better woman than I. "Sometime on Monday you'll be getting a long fax message, addressed to me."

"I'm afraid I won't, you know," said Louise.

It took Diana a moment to absorb her sister's words. "What do you mean?"

"The fax machine's broken," Louise said. "It never did work very well—one of Harold's more enthusiastic purchases." Decoded: busty blond saleslady, Diana thought. But Louise's calm, detached voice continued: "I haven't had it fixed, I'm afraid. We don't really need a fax machine at all."

Maybe not, but I sure do. "Louise, this isn't important to you, I know," Diana said, wondering if the contrition she was trying to pour into her voice sounded as smarmy to her sister as it did to her. "But I cannot tell you how important it is to me. Who sells electronics up where you are?"

"Goodness, I really don't know," her sister replied, and Diana heard just the faintest edge of refined malice behind the sweet blurriness that Louise used as a shield. "Caldor's in Norwalk, I suppose."

"Caldor's," Diana repeated. "Great. Now, I'm going to order a fax machine from them and charge it to my card. All you have to do is pick it up sometime before Monday, and plug it in. Can you do that?"

"Certainly." The vagueness had vanished. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Diana?"

"Not if I keep dodging," she said. "The person sending the message will call first. Her name is Xenia Dawkins. Okay so far?"

"I'm a housewife, dear—not an idiot. Continue."

And don't patronize, Diana. "As soon as you tell her that she's talking to Louise, she'll send you the fax. When you've got it, put it in a plain white envelope—no, wait." Diana pulled herself up short. "Do you have an unused envelope from some unimpeachable charity lying around?"

"You know me too well, sister dear," Louise said coolly. "Will Planned Parenthood do?"

"Well, it may raise a few eyebrows at Wild-Freeman," Diana replied. "But it'll be just fine. Put the faxed pages inside, folded in a sheet of plain white paper, and address the envelope to me, marked 'Personal' and 'By Messenger.' Then give it to Harold to bring in Tuesday morning. I'll have the messenger pick it up from his office. If that's all right," she added hastily.

"I'm sure Harold would be delighted to bring it by himself," said Louise. "On his way downtown."

"Thanks," said Diana, "but I don't want anyone quite as major Wall Street as Harold drawing attention to the delivery." And I don't want your husband within a mile of me under any circumstances.

"I'll tell him," Louise said. "But where you're concerned, physical restraint may be required."

How can you live with a man you can't trust even with his sister-in-law? Diana thought. "Tell him I'll be in a meeting all morning."

"All right," Louise said. "And Diana—I hope it works out, whatever you're up to. Be careful."

Yes, there still is that bond, Diana thought. In spite of everything. Before she could stop herself, she said, "I love you, dear," and hung up quickly.

Next on her agenda was Maury Thomas, and she hadn't a clue where to begin.

29. Szabo

West 54th Street, Manhattan; Saturday morning

Gunmetal-gray dawn seeped through the dirt-streaked window, and Eric watched the meager furnishings of his room begin to take shape. He had been lying awake since just before five, letting his brain spin free in the hope that some dazzling course of action would loom out of the swirling mental fog. It used to work that way: all he had to do was stop brooding about a problem, let his subconscious work without looking over its shoulder, and an inspired solution would take shape almost without fail.

When the gaps between inspired solutions began to be longer and more frequent, Eric discovered he could jump-start his imagination with a drink or two—just to free up the gears, as he told himself. In time the necessary two drinks became four, and then six. What looked like a stroke of brilliance when viewed through four double bourbons would too often assume, the next morning, an appearance of driveling lunacy.

And tonight there was a new problem. The free-floating images that kept recurring, that made him twist and writhe until the sheets and blankets were wound around him like a sweaty shroud, were mostly of Diana Speed. Clothed, semi-clothed, or entirely nude, but always regarding him with a coolly speculative eye that was far more arousing than any open invitation could have been.

All right, he told himself, to hell with free association. Concentrate. There has to be an opening, a point of leverage. And there was: Van Bronk.

When you had access to an expert, Eric knew, it was dumb not to use him. Ludo Van Bronk was certainly an expert. He was also, in Eric's considered opinion, a prick with ears who fed on contempt for the human race. There had never been any love between the two men, no camaraderie that would make either want to do a favor for a former colleague.

But if the carrot had no appeal, Eric decided, then the whip would have to work, because Van Bronk was the best cleanup artist in the business, and he'd had the time to go over Harley Wahl's studio apartment with professional care. If there'd been anything to find there, he and his crew would have found it.

Locating Van Bronk was no problem. Between assignments he lived out on Long Island, in a tiny South Shore home suitable for a retired government employee, with his faded wife of twenty years who still thought her husband did something statistical for the Bureau of the Census.

Getting into Van Bronk's house uninvited was impossible, though. In the days when the two men had worked together, Eric often wondered how Van Bronk explained to his wife the murderous electrical barriers that made their Cape Cod cottage into a gray-shingled fortress. Probably he didn't bother with explanations, and Florence Van Bronk was certainly not the woman to question her husband.

The answer Eric had been seeking dropped into place at last. Not brilliant, not artistic, but it would have to serve.

And anyway, he reflected, it was the brilliant, artistic ideas that had so often got him into trouble in the past.

He kicked back the covers and sat up. Swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Let's do it, he thought.

* * *

It was Florence's voice on the answering machine's programmed greeting, but Eric assumed her husband was monitoring it. I am definitely annoyed, he reminded himself. All the way out to Freeport on a Saturday morning, and no one to meet me at the station. "Where the hell are you, Ludo?" he snarled into the pay phone. "More to the point, why aren't you here?"

"Szabo?" Van Bronk's harsh baritone was blurred. More than likely the telephone had wakened him: like many in his line of work, he was a nocturnal. "Where—"

"At Freeport station, where else?" Eric said. "It's nine goddamn thirty. I've been here fifteen minutes."

"The station?" Eric could almost hear Van Bronk shaking his bullet head to clear it. "Here in Freeport? Why—"

"Shit!" Eric snapped. "I bet that old fruitcake"—Sorry, Bernie—"forgot to tell you. And after sending me out here at the goddamn crack of dawn."

"Sent you why?" Van Bronk demanded. "The job's done. He knows I don't like—"

For the third time Eric interrupted: "It's Himself. Panic stations. Now, do you want to come get me or do I call a cab? I don't plan to piss away my entire Saturday in this two-bit crab pot."

"Okay, okay," said Van Bronk. "I'll be down. Give me five minutes. No, make it ten."

Damn, Eric thought. The extra five minutes would be a phone call to Bernie, a routine check. Van Bronk might reel back under unexpected pressure, but he wouldn't forget such an obvious precaution. Now Eric's feeble plan looked even feebler, hung on the wisp of an old friendship.

* * *

The nondescript Buick went past the station lot twice before it entered, and Eric deliberately ignored it each time. When the car slid to a halt in front of him, he opened the door and slid quickly inside. It smelled of stale cigarette smoke and sour breath. Behind the wheel, Van Bronk looked like a gorilla with a hangover: short gray hair every which way on his round head; puffy-lipped mouth with the inevitable cigarette wedged in one corner; gray stubble on his slabbed cheeks. The tail of his pajama shirt stuck out below his parka. But his pale eyes were coldly alert. And definitely hostile.

At least he's here, Eric thought. "Morning," he grunted. Let him make the play, he reminded himself.

"Yeah." Van Bronk pulled away from the curb, his eyes darting to the rearview mirror. He drove in silence for a couple of blocks, down toward the water, past gray-shingled houses that looked even grayer in the January chill. "So what exactly do you want, Szabo?" he finally asked. "That old fairy Plunkett just said you were working directly for Himself on this one."

Thank you, Bernie, Eric thought. Thank you, thank you. "Everything," he said. "I want to see every scrap you took out of there. But more than that," he added, seeing the muscle bunch along Van Bronk's jaw, "I want your reading, Ludo."

Van Bronk's grunt might have been satisfaction. "Should've asked me right away," he said. "I dumped most of it, especially you-know-what."

"You-know-what I've already seen," Eric said. "It's the small stuff I want, the things an expert like you notices and everybody else overlooks."

Van Bronk seemed to swell slightly under Eric's grudging praise. "Well, it's not much," he said gloomily. "Like I told you, most of it's gone for good. Even if you could fish it up, it's not what you'd call accessible anymore."

Eric remembered now: Van Bronk's favored method of disposal was the fifty-gallon galvanized-steel drum, weighted

with ball bearings and sealed with acrylic resin; the bearings filled most of the unused space, and the liquid resin flowed into the tiniest remaining interstices. Once the resin set up, only an archaeologist with a jackhammer had a chance of dissecting the contents—and to find the drum itself, he'd have to go out in the Atlantic, beyond the fifty-fathom line, where Van Bronk had tipped it over the side of his big old powerboat.

* * *

They were sitting in what Eric thought of as web central: the electronic hub of Van Bronk's elaborate early-warning system. The little room was what Long Island real estate agents called a den—a windowless box too big for a closet, too small for a bedroom. Its cheaply paneled walls were almost hidden by amateurish but sturdy shelving, unpainted planks that sagged under the weight of gray-and-black crackle-finished metal boxes. Loops of wiring, red and black and white, swung like vines from box to box. Here and there a colored bulb glowed yellow, red, or green.

Van Bronk was squatting, more apelike than ever, in front of a safe that was concealed behind a swing-out rack of paperback electronics manuals. "Here's all I saved," he said, producing a small plastic container with a tight lid. He turned away from the safe, kicking the door closed as he did so. Inside, Eric caught a glimpse of what looked like stacked bills, a bulging envelope with the cryptic label *Asstd ID's* written in soft pencil.

Spilled on the desk, the contents of the plastic box were pitiful. More photos of Harley Wahl in uniform, some apparently from the same picture-taking session as the one Eric had found in his wallet. More publicity glossies of "Brick Wahl—Actor," one showing him naked and impressively erect. An expired passport for Harley J. Wahl and an equally out-of-date Kentucky driver's license.

"No wallet," said Van Bronk. "I figure you got that when you found him. You and whoever was with you."

"Not much in the wallet," Eric replied. "Social Security card and a couple of rinky-dink bits of plastic."

Van Bronk shrugged. "You never know what can come in useful," he said. "We might be able to make a deal."

It was what Eric had been counting on, one reason he had put Van Bronk's name into Bernie Plunkett's head: an old rumor in the amorphous outer reaches of the Channing organization said that Ludo Van Bronk ran a sideline in documentation, for people who suddenly found it necessary to be someone else. The Rajah almost certainly knew about it but had probably decided that a little private enterprise was a worthwhile exchange for the convenience of having such a useful agent.

"I'm not primarily interested in Wahl," Eric said. "What did you get on the woman he was living with?"

"She wasn't living with him," Van Bronk replied. "Looks like she just dropped by for a quick lube job every once in a while." He bared his square, yellowing teeth in a humorless grin. "Might've stayed the night, but she lived somewhere else."

"Any identification?" said Eric, trying to sound offhand.

"Got some lovely fingerprints, if they're any use to you."

"I don't have the time for that game," said Eric. Or the access—and what if her prints aren't on file? "Name or address; either will do fine."

"No address," Van Bronk said.

But he's found a name, Eric thought. Why not just say so? Must be something wrong with it. "You mentioned a deal." He took out an envelope with the dead man's Social Security card and the two slips of plastic. "Here's my openers."

Van Bronk extended his huge hand, fingers like hairy bananas, and Eric released the envelope. The security man inspected the contents carefully. "Not much," he said, "but I guess it'll take the pot."

"Not quite so fast," said Eric. "What're you trading?"

Van Bronk opened the safe door and took out a folded sheet of rough blotting paper, passed it across without a word.

It was a theatrical program, two standard-size sheets folded double and printed—cheaply—on both sides. *Horseplay in the Capitol Cloakroom* was the name of the piece, but what drew Eric's eye was the inscription that sprawled across the cover: "To Off-Off's most talented stallion, Brick Wahl, with opening-night love and squeezes from . . ." The signature beneath was a wild bird's nest of loops and whorls. Eric stared hard at it for several seconds, then looked up at Van Bronk.

"It's got to be one of the five women in that program," said the security man. "You just have to decide which."

* * *

Down the corridor a door opened, releasing a sudden burst of laughter and conversation. Some kind of party, Eric had decided, when he'd come up two hours before. Wild-Freeman's offices seemed a peculiar party site, especially on a Saturday evening in January, but maybe it was just another of publishing's little customs he hadn't encountered before. He'd managed to slip past the merrymaking without drawing attention, closed his own office door against the noise. He could still hear a distant clatter, but the office was a lot quieter than his furnished room would be at this hour.

Five women, Eric thought. That shambles of a signature really could be any one of them. He considered the list on the desk before him:

- Veronica Varley, the female lead (judging by the length of her bio) of *Horseplay in the Capitol Cloakroom*. She had two parts, "Prez's mistress" and "Mare of D.C."
- Nadya Roundheels, another actress, billed as "Prez's wife." (Brick Wahl played "Prez," Eric was unsurprised to see, as well as "Gen. Retreat" and "Wash. Monument.")
- A third performer, whose only name appeared to be Dithyramba and whose part was "a whore: the spirit of Congress," thus presumptively female.
- The author of *Horseplay*, given as Theodora White.

• The show's producer, Magdalen Tyrrell, who also appeared in the program as stage manager.

Eric had just decided that "Nadya" was definitely too short for the signature on the program when it occurred to him that perhaps the signer had used an entirely different real name or a nickname that was private between her and Wahl. "Balls," he muttered, more or less under his breath.

"Something wrong, Eric?"

He managed to look up without starting. "Oh, hello . . . Maury," he said, pulling the name from memory with an effort. The older man was looking with open curiosity at the papers on the desk, and Eric deliberately opened the drawer and slid them into it.

"You're certainly working hard," Maury said with a warm, fraudulent smile. "Why don't you take a break and join us for a drink?"

30. Magdalen

U.S. Highway 54 East; 10:30 p.m. Saturday

The sign flashed up out of the darkness and was gone before her aching eyes could take in more than the single word ***WICHITA***. Can't be too much farther, though, she thought. They'd swung north off U.S. 40, the main east-west highway, back in New Mexico, taking the truck route that sliced through a bleak corner of Texas, an even bleaker appendix of Oklahoma, and into Kansas. At Wichita they planned to grab a few hours' sleep in a motel, then pick up Highway 35 and follow it northeast to Topeka, where 35 intersected with U.S. 70, the road that would carry them home.

She and Kenny were running a little ahead of the schedule they had worked out, but not nearly enough to allow for any serious delay. The thought made her look across at her companion, wrapped to the ears in his own clothing and a cheap sleeping bag they'd bought back in Albuquerque. He seemed to be asleep, but she knew from the way his jaw was set that he was fighting his own silent, interior battle.

"You all right, Top?" she asked, ready to ignore his words and draw her own conclusions from his tone.

He didn't answer for nearly a minute. Then: "Not really, kid."

The grating pain in his voice nearly made her put the station wagon off the asphalt and into the gritty mud that edged the road. A huge eighteen-wheeler loomed up from behind, blinked its headlights, and swung past. In the sudden glare she risked a second look at him. "What do you want me to do?" she asked. As she spoke, she saw the sign she'd been waiting for: WICHITA CITY LIMITS.

He must have seen it, too, though his eyes seemed tight shut. "Soon's we're into town," he said, "pull over someplace and get directions to the hospital."

It was the obvious—the only—thing to do, but hearing him say the words made her gut tighten in dismay. Was this how her whole grand design ended, busted out in the middle of Kansas? She had been creating the role inside her head: part Joan of Arc, part Angel of Death. Now it looked like just another flop. Last in a long line of failures. The story of her life.

"No," said Kenny. "We're not done yet."

"But what can we do—"

"Shut up and drive," he said. "And listen to me."

* * *

The resident holding down the emergency room was very young, a fact he attempted to disguise with a soup-strainer mustache and an air of lofty arrogance. He ignored Magdalen's carefully prepared explanation and addressed Kenny, who was slumped untidily on a straight-backed chair: "What's the problem, Kenneth? A little too much Thunderbird on an empty stomach?"

Kenny's eyes opened slowly. "The problem, young trooper, is a terminal shortage of red corpuscles," he said, his voice

low but clear. "If you don't get some blood into me real fast, you're going to have a corpse to explain—and this lady as a witness that you were too stupid to recognize acute leukemia when it was two feet from your goddamned nose."

It was not the way Magdalen would have opened a doctor-patient relationship, but it seemed to work. In a matter of minutes Kenny was in a private room—on the strength of Magdalen's Visa card, which (she thought) would soon be showing some of the same symptoms as Kenny. The results of the blood workup came back inside the hour, and Kenny was hooked up to a transparent sack that poured not whole blood, but platelets into his arm.

The doctor drew Magdalen out of the room. "Mr. Tyrrell should bounce back almost immediately," he said. "Of course, it won't last—but you already know that."

"Yes," she said. "How long . . ."

He shrugged helplessly. "A few days, maybe. Where'd you say you were going?"

"Los Angeles," she replied. "To see his mother."

The doctor pursed his lips. "If I were you, I'd take a plane," he said. "What sort of chemotherapy's he on?"

She remembered the arsenal of pills in Kenny's pocket. "He doesn't like to talk about it," she said.

"I guess not," said the young doctor. His light blue eyes surveyed Magdalen. "You look pretty strung out yourself. You got a place to sleep tonight? He's not going anyplace till morning."

Sleep. The bare word almost dropped her to her knees. "Maybe a motel . . . ," she began.

"I know a decent place about a mile from here," the doctor said. "Here, I'll write the directions down for you."

Clutching the scrap of paper like a talisman, she stumbled into the hospital parking lot. The wind was driving tiny cyclones of powdered snow before it, and the air felt like razor blades in her nostrils. The half-empty lot seemed completely strange, and it took her fifteen minutes to find the station

wagon, tucked into a lonely corner. She was within a few feet of it when she realized something was wrong with the vehicle's silhouette: the tailgate was open, and as she froze in midstep she heard the muffled thump of someone moving inside.

The adrenaline rush was so sudden and strong, it made her gasp. In an instant her exhausted apprehension flamed into rage. She groped in her shoulder bag and extracted Roscoe Humm's pistol—surprisingly small for so large a man. An oddly square, futuristic-looking piece of metal. Kenny had recognized it right away: a NATO piece, he'd called it.

Another thump from inside the station wagon, and now she saw the wavering beam of a flashlight. She pulled the automatic's slider back the way Kenny had showed her, felt the satisfying clash of oiled metal as it sprang forward. As she stepped carefully toward the station wagon, the vehicle shuddered and a huge, indeterminate shape appeared on the tailgate. A second later she realized it was a man's rear end, aimed upward as he backed clumsily out.

She slipped the gun into her coat pocket. "What the hell are you doing in my car?" she demanded.

The man was even bigger than Roscoe Humm, but mostly beer belly and behind. In the uncertain light he seemed to be wearing a uniform, a wide black leather belt where his waist should have been. He lowered himself carefully to the asphalt and brushed off the knees of his trousers before he spoke: "I was just trying to do you a favor, little lady. Your headlights was on, and I turned 'em off for you. Save your battery."

She felt herself relax, felt the taut energy suddenly slacken. "I see," she said. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Without seeming to move, he was suddenly very close to her, looming over her. The badge on his fur-collared coat caught the light for a moment, and she read the words *SECURITY GUARD*. His breath reeked of onions and cigarettes. "Happened to see those funny-looking tubes in the back," he said. "What are they, anyway?"

Exhausted as she was, Magdalen's trained ear still caught

the tension in the guard's seemingly casual tone. Kenny had supplied her with the answer for just such a question, but her memory refused to recover it. Her grip tightened on the automatic in her coat pocket. Finally, just as the guard cleared his throat, she remembered: "Drill bits," she said quickly. "For an oil well. Down in the Oklahoma panhandle."

"Is that so?" the guard said, not trying to hide his disbelief. "Don't look like any drill bits I ever saw." He had half turned from her, hiding his right side, but he was still talking: "And cushioned like that . . . Only one thing I know of that comes in tubes and needs an air cushion, and that's—"

The guard's gloved hand was fumbling at his belt, she saw. No, at the holster slung from his belt. Magdalen squeezed the trigger. With a flat *crack!* the automatic bucked in her coat pocket, and something hot seared her hand. The guard grunted, as if the wind had been driven out of him, and fell back against the station wagon's side. He was still trying to unsnap the flap on his pistol holster, and Magdalen fired again.

This time he cried out, and his thick legs buckled under him. He slid to the ground, his back against the station wagon. His eyes were closed, but he was still alive, wheezing wetly. Magdalen forced herself to bend over him, remove his revolver from its holster. She was on the point of tossing it into the darkness when it occurred to her that the gun in her hand had only three—or was it five?—shots remaining. She dropped the guard's pistol in her other coat pocket and stood up. As she did so, the wounded man groaned. It was too much for her overstrained nerves: she turned and fled toward the lights.

A black man in a porter's uniform was standing just outside the emergency room entrance, smoking. He eyed Magdalen with curiosity as she approached. Enter an innocent relative, she thought, slowing her too rapid steps. "Good evening," she said.

"How do?" the black replied. She was abreast of him when he said, "You hear some funny noises out there, lady? Like somebody shooting?"

She forced herself to stop. Knitted her brows to indicate she was considering his question. "No," she said. "Can't say I did." She waited two beats, then cocked her head as if an idea had struck her: "But I did have to slam my car door twice before it'd stay closed. That must've been what you heard."

He was, she saw, at least half convinced, and that would have to do. She brushed past him into the building. The corridors were deserted now, and the sole nurse at the third-floor station was asleep on her chair, snoring softly. Magdalen tiptoed past her to Kenny's room, pushed the door open.

His face was peaceful, his breathing even. She hated to wake him, but there was no choice. "Top," she whispered. "Top, wake up."

His dark eyes were looking up at her questioningly. She saw his nostrils flare. "What's wrong?" he said softly. "Who'd you shoot?"

"How—"

"You smell like a firing range," he said, struggling to sit up. "What happened?"

Quickly she told him, surprised at her own calm. "You did right," he said, cutting her short. "Get my clothes."

When he was dressed, he reached into the deep pocket of his sheepskin coat and produced the familiar handful of capsules. "Two of those big ones," he said. "With a glass of water." And answering the question in her eyes: "Plain old Benzedrine. I need a couple more hours of sleep, but these'll give you enough zip to get a good few miles down the road before light. Now, pop 'em down and let's roll."

The duty nurse never moved as they crept past her station, and the porter at the emergency room door was gone.

So was the wounded guard, though there was a dark, sticky pool next to the station wagon.

Magdalen felt the strength go out of her legs, then gasped as Kenny jabbed her hard, just under the ribs. "Don't you wuss out on me now," he said. "With all that blood on the ground, he didn't go far."

He hadn't. They found him lying facedown, just outside the darkened little booth at the parking lot entrance. Magdalen could see no sign of movement. "Is he . . . ?"

"Damned if I know," Kenny replied. "Check and see." A moment later, as she crouched on one knee, he added, "Forget the damn wrist. Put your fingertips at the base of his throat, like this."

The dreadful, loose wattles were quite cold. She felt without result for any sign of a pulse. "He's dead," she reported.

"Good," said Kenny. He had moved a few feet away, to lean against a low wood fence. "What's in his wallet?"

The wallet was jammed in his hip pocket, but at last she worked it free. "Forty-two wet dollars, a MasterCard, Kansas driver's license, pistol permit, and"—the sound that escaped her was something between a giggle and a snort—"and a photo of two girls making love. Clumsily."

"Keep the money and the credit card," said Kenny. "There's a drainage ditch here by the fence. Tip him down into it. Might buy us a couple hours."

She regarded the huge, sprawling heap beside her. "I can't," she said flatly.

"You can," he replied.

She could.

31. Diana

East 50th treet; 1:30 a.m. Sunday

Like most of Manhattan's single women, Diana reacted to late night telephone calls with suspicion, annoyance, and a twinge of apprehension at being reminded how easily a stranger could reach into her private life. Only her years of working for the Rajah, who operated by no known timetable, kept her from turning off her answering machine's audible signal when she went to bed.

But she would never, ever, lift the receiver until she was quite sure who was at the other end of the line, so when the bell's insistent burring brought her up from the depths of sleep, she only rolled over, checked the time, and cocked an ear to the voice at the other end.

Happy and stoned, was her first reaction, corrected almost instantly to Triumphant and a little tight. But not, in any case, about to hang up. She reached over and lifted the handset. "What is it, Maury?"

"Listen, Diana, I'm terribly sorry to bother you. . . ."

Baloney: you're delighted, she thought, fully awake now. And that I don't like at all.

"But since he's your"—a nicely timed pause—"protégé, so to speak, it seemed to me—"

"Maury, will you get to the goddamn point?" she snapped, thinking, Eric. Something's happened to Eric.

"He's only had about three rather small drinks," Maury's voice continued, dripping hypocritical concern. "But I'm afraid he's quite incapable. Rather offensive, too, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Who're you talking about, Maury?" she demanded, knowing the answer perfectly well.

"Eric Szabo, who else?" Maury said. "A few of us were having a little after-hours drink, here at the office, and your Mr. Szabo invited himself in . . ."

Maury was lying, she knew, but that hardly mattered. With the phone wedged between jaw and shoulder, she began to unbutton her flannel nightshirt. When Maury paused for breath, she said, "I'll be over in fifteen minutes," and hung up before he could respond.

In the ice-cold taxi she found herself trying to gauge just how much of the truth Maury had been telling. Enough, she decided, and in this case enough was definitely too much. What the hell did Eric think he was doing, falling off the wagon at a time like this? Couldn't handle the pressure, maybe; or maybe he was one of those lushes who went on periodic benders without any warning. Still, she was surprised. And, she had to admit, angrily disappointed.

She braked her emotions then, forced herself to examine them. From one point of view it was all to her advantage if Eric folded and left the field to her—especially in view of the breakthrough she'd made just before going to bed. And yet she'd drifted to sleep anticipating how she was going to lay her startling discovery before him, how she was going to savor his admiration.

Is that all I am? she wondered. A dame who needs a man to support her ego? No, she decided in the same mental breath: not guilty. On a sexual level Eric aroused her interest as no man since Troubridge had done, but she could keep that in its place. His stronger appeal was as a loner like herself—and a more principled person than she saw herself as being. Her brain was quicker in most situations, she thought, but sometimes her very mental agility made her say and do things she later regretted.

Faced with a hopeless battle, she thought, neither of them would ever surrender, but at some point Eric would give up fighting, would stand and accept whatever came. Diana would still be twisting and turning, biting and scratching.

Oh, come off it, she thought. Who am I kidding? My rival shoots himself in the foot, and here I come with the bandages. Dumber than that, if possible: she'd seen instantly that Maury Thomas was using Eric's faux pas to set up both of them at once. The smart move would've been to say "Eric who?" and hang up. Well, it was too late for that now.

* * *

The remains of the party littered Maury's big office—half a dozen dirty glasses, a limp cardboard box with a few rigid hors d'oeuvres stuck in the corners, a pall of stale smoke, and Eric Szabo. He was sitting bolt upright on Maury's own desk chair, his big hands clutching a nearly full glass and his sweating face an unpleasant pale green. Besides the host—casually elegant in blue blazer, maroon turtleneck, and charcoal-gray slacks—the only other people in the room were Marla MacIntyre and Clif Burrell, who were perched side by side on Maury's big sofa, for all the world like an audience. Or witnesses.

"Hello, Diana," said Clif. He was wearing one of his inevitable brown suits and had managed to liven it up with a tan shirt, a mahogany-and-green tie, and even a chestnut handkerchief. Until now, Diana realized, she had never thought of brown

as being able to clash with itself. He was watching her with his head to one side, and Diana decided he was in on the game, even if he hadn't set it up.

Though Marla's flame-red dress dominated the room, she seemed not entirely present. Her huge dark eyes were focused on a point halfway between her and Diana, and her smile wobbled loosely on her full lips. "Hi," she breathed. "Have a drinkie."

"Diana's here on an errand of mercy," Maury corrected her gently. "If anyone can get Eric home safely, she can."

"Don't push it, Maury," Diana said. She turned to Eric, who was staring at her with almost desperate intensity. "Ready to go?" she asked.

"Am now," he replied. He leaned forward, carefully set his glass on Maury's desk, and pressed his hands against the blotter.

Diana leaned toward him. "Here, let me give—"

He shrugged her off with a wordless snarl. Slowly, slowly, he rose, swaying, to his feet. Bracing himself with his left hand, he extended his right, fingers shaped to take the glass he'd been holding.

"I'll take care of that," said Maury, stepping forward. He reached for Eric's glass, found himself grasped by the wrist. "Hey, not so hard," he cried, his voice rising. "For Christ's sake, Eric, cut it out!"

Eric bent the older man's forearm back, his eyes suddenly blazing with unsuppressed fury. "Bugger off," he said quite clearly, and gave Maury a shove that sent him staggering into Marla's lap and onto the floor. Still moving in slow motion, Eric picked up the glass, swung his head to face Diana. "Sorry 'bout this," he said, articulating with painful care. "Help me out of here."

Marla was giggling and Maury struggling, red faced, to get up. Clif Burrell, who hadn't even flinched as Maury caromed off the sofa, watched without expression as Eric shuffled toward the door, still holding his glass with exaggerated care.

"A mean drunk, Diana," said Maury, at last on his feet. He seemed about to add something else but only shook his head. Though only a few strands of his snow-white hair had been mussed, he looked suddenly old and rumpled.

From behind him, Marla said, "Now we can really fly—right, Maury?"

A quick flash of something like alarm showed on Maury's lined face and as quickly vanished. Diana, with half her attention on Eric, shambling unsteadily down the corridor, stored Marla's remark for future consideration. "Good night, all," she said.

* * *

In the cab Eric refused to give up his glass, which he held in one hand, the other, palm down, sealing in the contents. When they arrived in front of Diana's brownstone and she stepped out, he handed the glass to her and began to lever himself painfully through the door. She was poised to upend the drink into the gutter when he cried out, "Don't spill it!" in a roar that rattled the lids on garbage cans in the areaway.

"All right," she said. "Just take it easy, Eric."

The steps up to the brownstone's entrance were steep, and he climbed them crabwise, with painful concentration. Inside the street door, he waited, swaying, as she sorted through her key case with one hand. "Not drunk," he said.

"Whatever you say," she remarked, her attention on the awkward splay of keys. She held the inner door open for him. "One more flight," she said.

"Right," he agreed, regarding the carpeted stairway solemnly. Advancing, he set one foot on the bottom step and, just as Diana thought he might topple over backward, grabbed the banister in both hands and began to haul himself up. Halfway to the top he paused, swiveled his head slowly until his eye caught the glass in her hand. "Good," he said.

"Keep going," she replied. "I've got your damn drink."

In the apartment she propelled him into the living room.

"It's the sofa for you, my man," she said, and added: "D'you want to slosh the rest of this now?"

He was, she realized, trying to smile at her. "Hell, no," he said. "Put in fridge."

"If you like," she said. "Now lie down here, and I'll get a couple of blankets."

"No, no," he said. "Mean it: Put glass in fridge."

"I said I would," she replied, letting her irritation show. Then she saw, for the first time, that he was holding himself upright by sheer force of will, and a wave of exasperated affection swept her. "That must be some drink," she said.

"Damn straight," he said. Abruptly his legs folded, and he sat down hard. He shook his head angrily. "Some drink," he repeated, looking up to where she stood over him. He was about to pass out, she saw, but was marshaling the remains of his strength to speak one more time. " 'S called chloral hydrate," he said. "Mickey Finn to you." His unexpected smile made her heart turn over, and then his eyes closed and he tipped slowly to one side.

She heard him get up once during what remained of the night. He bounced off the wall twice getting to the bathroom, but once there he threw up with nearly noiseless efficiency. When he came out, she had to fight down her desire to go to him. He's all right now, she told herself. And anyway, if he was the man she thought he was, he wouldn't enjoy being seen in such squalid shape.

Diana knew her estimate was correct when he got up at six and tiptoed almost soundlessly to the bathroom, began to wash himself from the sink. She rolled out of bed, tossed her nightshirt into the closet, and slipped into the black lace nightgown that Troubridge had so enjoyed peeling her out of. She stepped to the full-length mirror and decided, after a quick inspection, that another night of celibacy had done her no visible damage. She was running a comb through her hair when she suddenly began to laugh.

"Really, dear," she said to herself. "Give the poor man time

to catch his breath." She removed the nightie, pulled on the slacks she had worn the night before, added a sweatshirt, and then extracted from the back of the closet a heavy, salmon-colored terry-cloth robe with patched elbows. As she passed the closed bathroom door, she called out, "Use the shower if you'd like. And there's a new toothbrush in the medicine cabinet."

"Thanks," he called back, sounding as if he meant it. "You don't happen to have any—"

"I'm leaving a bathrobe in the hall," she said. "It should fit you." And before he could respond, added, "Coffee?"

"About a tub. Black with lots of sugar. And if you have any aspirin . . ."

"Also in the cabinet."

* * *

He was sitting in the living room when she came in fifteen minutes later, carrying a tray with two big mugs of coffee. The robe was an extralarge, but far narrower in the shoulders than Eric was. Tied securely around his waist, it looked uncomfortably tight across his powerful chest.

"God, that smells wonderful," he said, rising awkwardly. The robe's cuffs were halfway up his corded forearms, as thick around as another man's calves.

"It's French hunk," she said, and saw his jaw drop an instant before her own words hit her. "*Roast*, I mean." Her cheeks felt as if they were on fire. "French roast." She let him struggle with his not-quite-straight face for a couple of seconds and added, "You are, you know: a hunk, even if not French."

"Thank you," he said, taking one of the mugs. He shoveled three heaping spoonfuls of sugar into it and began to stir, staring down at the black, swirling surface as he spoke. "It's been a while since anybody called me that."

"But it pleases you," Diana said, watching him over the brim of her own mug.

He raised his eyes. They looked terrible—red veins like a

Los Angeles freeway map and dark semicircles under them—but a little more roughening hardly mattered to a face as battered as his. "Yes, it does," he said simply. "Used to be my stock in trade, as Jeri LaBorde probably told you."

"She did say something like that." Diana found herself grinning at him, and he grinned back.

They let the warmth hang in the air between them for ten seconds or so, and Diana saw he was going to break the spell even before he spoke: "I had the idea that your English friend was taller and thinner," he said.

Nicely done, she thought. "He was. But the robe was my father's." She drained her mug and rose. "What do you want for breakfast? We've got eggs, bacon, toast . . ." She trailed off as the color left his face.

"I don't think I'm up to food just yet," he said. "You go ahead without me."

From the kitchen she called, "When did you realize Maury had doped you?"

"Second drink," he replied, pitching his voice over the crackle of frying bacon. "The first was supposed to be a Virgin Mary—so much Tabasco in it I couldn't taste anything else." She glanced around, and he was standing in the door behind her. The robe had opened slightly across his chest.

"How did it feel?" she asked, dropping her eyes to the bacon.

"Not like getting tanked," he said. "No fun and games with chloral: it just comes up from behind and bashes you. I wouldn't have known what was happening, except that I asked for a glass of water and he doped that, too. I tasted it then, guessed what was happening."

"Marla and Clif were his witnesses," Diana said.

"That, yes," he replied slowly. "But Maury's little party was already going when I got back"—he caught himself almost quickly enough—"when I got to the office. Nailing me and then you, that was just an improvisation."

Diana had her own suspicions about Maury's little party,

but Eric's verbal slip had reminded her that there were more important matters at hand. "You found out who we're looking for," she said.

"Kind of," he said. "I've got five names, and she's one."

Diana scooped the bacon from the pan with a single, decisive motion. "I've done better than you, then," she said. "I know who we're after, and where she lives."

"Great!" he exclaimed, and if he felt anything but admiration, it didn't show. "How'd you pull that off?"

"Like most great discoveries," she said, laughing. "By accident."

32. Eric

He sipped gingerly at the dark, strong coffee as he watched Diana engulf a pair of fried eggs, six pieces of crisp bacon, and three slices of whole-wheat toast smeared with jam. She clearly loved to eat and didn't care who knew it, and he found it another of the things he liked about her—this straightforward enjoyment of a sensual pleasure that most women would blush at owning up to.

She was observing him with amusement in her eyes. "Helps to have a trick metabolism," she said.

"Say again?"

"Me." She emptied the mug of coffee—her third—in a single swallow. "Eat as much as I like, but it doesn't show." She laughed. "Probably won't last: I'll end up looking like some farmer's prize sow."

He couldn't believe that and saw she didn't, either. "When you're through gorging," he said, "maybe we'd better get to work."

"Right." She swept up the tray. "I'll clean up while I explain what I've found. More coffee?"

* * *

"Can't think why I didn't see it right away," she said as she wiped out the frying pan with an oil-dampened paper towel. "That answering machine of Harley Wahl's has a speed dial button."

"Speed dial?" Eric repeated. From where he was standing in the doorway to the tiny kitchen, he had a perfect view of Diana's perfect behind, and every time she shifted position, he lost track of what she was saying.

"One of those attachments that lets you save phone numbers and dial them by punching two or three keys," she said. She hung the frying pan on a hook above the stove and turned to face him. Her dark sweatshirt had an unusual high neck with a drawstring collar. It suited her slender throat and thin, angular face. REGENT OF AUCKLAND was embroidered in white thread just over her left breast. The kitchen suddenly seemed very hot indeed.

"You feeling all right?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"A little warm," he admitted. "Maybe we'd better adjourn to the living room."

As he lowered himself gratefully to the couch, she opened a cabinet and took out Harley Wahl's answering machine. It was a perfectly ordinary device, but set down in the smooth perfection of Diana's apartment, it seemed old and shabby.

"Look," she said, prodding the keys with her forefinger. "The numbers are almost worn off the one and the zero. The two and the speed dial button are the only other keys with signs of wear."

He could see the explanation now, but she was clearly enjoying herself. "Please continue," he said.

"Well, there's one number, coded 01, that he calls—called all the time. And another, 02, that he also called a lot, but not as often. He was an actor, so it stands to reason the numbers were agent and girlfriend." Her wide mouth stretched in a

self-deprecating smile. "I got it backward the first time—figured it was the agent who got most of the play."

"And the girlfriend?" Eric asked.

"Her name's Magdalen Tyrrell. An unlisted number on West Twenty-first Street. That's the good news."

He could guess the rest. "She's moved, right?"

"It was disconnected last week. No new listing at all: I checked all five boroughs, plus Westchester, Fairfield County, even Nassau and Suffolk."

"How about Jersey?" he asked.

She looked abashed, but only slightly. "I never thought of it," she said. "I suppose people do live there."

"Under duress," he replied, laughing. "But let's follow up what we've already got."

"Another burglary?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"If necessary. And then Harley's agent."

* * *

She led the way down the worn stone steps to the street and asked, over her shoulder, "Remember climbing these last night?"

"Barely," he said. "They seemed pretty alpine at the time."

She smiled, and the sun off the East River lit her face. Without looking up the street, she raised her hand, and a taxi materialized from nowhere, squealed to the curb.

"How the hell do you do that?" he asked.

"It's just a knack," she said. "Like opening locked doors with a knife blade."

"That's not a knack," he said. "That's practice."

In the taxi she gave the address—west of Seventh Avenue, by the number—and sat back. "About that little sample in my fridge," she began, and hesitated.

"Yes?" he prompted.

"I don't want you to do anything with it—yet." He could see she had worked the thought out in her head. "By now, Maury knows you've figured out what he did to you."

"And he knows I've told you," Eric added.

"Yes."

It was amazing, he thought, how different her smiles could be: this one was as cold and shiny as a new razor blade.

"He's probably wondering what I'm going to do with that glass of knockout stuff. Wishing he'd never had that bright idea last night."

"He might even be asking himself if you noticed the kind of shape his two little pals were in," Eric offered.

"Pretty obvious, wasn't it?" she said. "Especially Marla." Her mouth hardened. "I don't know how you feel about"—her eyes flicked to the back of the driver's head and then to Eric—"that kind of thing."

He shrugged. "I don't have a moral position on drugs, if that's what you mean."

"It's not," she said shortly. "But I thought you of all people would see what it can do to an organization."

Now he saw what she was getting at: "Your organization," he said.

"Exactly." She was silent for a minute or two, and he waited. "The thing is," she said, "I need Maury. Wild-Freeman needs Maury. And Clif."

"Marla?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." He could see her weighing her words. "I know it's politically incorrect to say so, but I wonder if she'd have gotten this far, this fast, with a white skin."

"She seems pretty sharp to me," he said.

She gave him a sidelong half smile. "I sometimes have a little trouble being fair to other women. Especially younger, upwardly mobile women."

For the first time Eric felt he'd had a glimpse into Diana's solitary, driven life—surprisingly like his own, in the old days, except that she carried responsibilities he'd always avoided. He wondered how long it'd been since she'd confided in another person.

The taxi made a sharp turn, and he saw they were almost

to their destination. "So you want to let Maury sweat for a while," he said.

Her smile had turned girlish. "Let's just say I want him to consider his position." She raised her voice. "Right here is fine, driver."

* * *

The building superintendent was short, very nearly cubical, and in his early sixties. He was also Teutonically stubborn, or maybe that was just his accent. "The apartment has already been rented," he said again, ignoring the twenty-dollar bill whose folded corner peeped from Eric's hand.

"I realize that," said Eric. "We only wanted to see it." He forced a smile that probably looked as false as it felt. "So we'd know what we missed."

"It is not yet cleaned," said the super.

From the hallway behind him an elderly woman appeared. "Good morning, Mr. Gotthard," she said as she slipped past.

"*Gruetzi*, Mrs. Byrne," said the super, never taking his hard little eyes off his visitors.

"Let me try," Diana murmured. Without waiting for Eric to reply, she stepped past him, addressing the super in a language that sounded like German on a roller coaster—swoopy, chirruping vowels dodging among a jagged foundation of gutturals. Whatever it was, it clearly affected the little man, whose square face lit up as he responded in the same tongue.

After only a couple of interchanges he led Diana upstairs, Eric trailing along behind. The halls were dark but immaculate, and in every corner stood a complicated, fragile little table with a lace doily precisely centered on it. Magdalen Tyrrell's apartment was on the second floor, toward the rear, and the super embarked on what was clearly an extended apology before Diana melted him with a beaming smile. He unlocked the door, stepped back with a dismissive shrug.

"*Vielen danke, Herr Gotthard,*" said Diana. For a moment

Eric thought the old man might dissolve before them, but he only scuttled off down the hall.

"You certainly made his day," Eric remarked as he turned the knob. "What was that, Austrian?"

"Good God, no," she said. "Swiss German or, as my dear old father used to call it, high-altitude Yiddish."

"Where—"

"Winter vacations when I was little: French in the dining room, *hochdeutsch* on the slope, *Schweiz-deutsch* in the kitchen. My introduction to the class system."

Something in her voice told him it was not a subject she wanted to continue. "Let's see what Magdalen left for us," he said, opening the door.

Damn little, he decided twenty minutes later. The furniture—dark, aggressively carved wood that looked as if it had been carpentered in the Black Forest by ill-tempered trolls—clearly went with the apartment. But whoever lived here had made a clean sweep of personal possessions. The only remaining items were a scattering of empty cardboard liquor cartons, stacks of newspaper (some already crumpled for packing), and a kitchen counter with an array of food containers, mostly half empty.

"Well, what does this tell us?" Diana asked from across the room.

"I'd guess she packed up in a hurry," said Eric, who had been asking himself the same question. "Took absolutely everything, to sort out later."

"Agreed," Diana replied. "Herr Gotthard says she just vanished. He came back from lunch five days ago and she was gone, bag and baggage. Left a note behind, but no forwarding address. He's quite put out about it." She was riffling through a stack of papers. Abruptly she stiffened. "Here's something she overlooked, though."

Eric moved to her side, dropped to one knee so that his bent thigh just barely didn't touch hers. "What is it?"

"The newspapers: didn't you notice? They're all theatrical

trades—*Variety*, *Show Business*, *Billboard*—all except for these three."

He hadn't noticed, and he should have. Now he focused on the three papers she indicated. Five days old, he saw; the city editions of the *Times*, the *Post*, and the *News*, each folded to an inside page on which appeared a story that was essentially the same in each publication. He scanned the articles quickly—then, as the implications sank in, reread them more slowly. At last he looked up at Diana, who nodded:

"Congressman Fielding—her first murder, and the reason Harley Wahl panicked."

Her assurance nearly bore him along with it, but he forced himself to hold back. "These are only follow-up pieces. They don't prove—"

"Of course they don't," Diana interrupted impatiently. "And we haven't any idea why she might've done it. But I've got a feeling we're on to something." She jumped to her feet, strode across the room, and began to page through another stack.

"What now?" Eric demanded, but his mind was still working to reject Diana's theory out of hand. Try as he would, the wild notion refused to go away. Rather, it triggered even more unsettling thoughts. If Diana was right, Eric had been hired at least in part to shield a woman who'd just murdered a very public figure. A woman at least three law enforcement bodies were probably stumbling over each other to find. A woman who had killed two men and seemed prepared—even eager—to kill several hundred.

"Damn," said Diana, tossing down the last paper. "I figured she might have clipped the front-page stories, the ones that ran the morning after the murder—after all, she's in show business, and those were her reviews. If she'd left those papers with that story cut out, it'd be something like real proof. But I guess that's too much to ask."

"Seems to me," Eric said slowly, "that if there's any chance you're right—any chance at all—it's time for you and me to

bail out, before we find ourselves accessories to five hundred and forty-what's-it murders."

"Five hundred and forty-six," she said. "Why can't you remember that number? It certainly sticks in my head." She rose and turned to him. "Look—do you seriously think I'm going to turn my back and walk out the door? I fought like hell to get where I am, and unless I come out of this smelling like a rose, the Rajah's going to ditch me like last night's corsage." Her voice was even and cool, but her eyes were glittering dangerously. "Running away may be okay for you, Eric, but as far as I'm concerned, it's not an option."

Her words cut through his self-possession like a scalpel. He was shaking with barely suppressed anger as he said, "You want options? How's ten years behind bars sound? Old man Fielding was a committee chairman of the United States Congress. That's big-time homicide in any book."

"Congress?" she snapped. "Don't tell me about Congress—I spent the worst year of my life married to it. If Magdalen Tyrrell killed old Hound Dawg Fielding, she ought to get a medal. Anyway," she continued, "the Rajah's got enough muscle to deal with this."

"You don't mean that," Eric said angrily. "And even if he did have that kind of power, why would he protect you or me?"

"Well, why'd he hire you?" she asked. "You still don't really know. I think it's time you found out."

Eric had come to exactly that conclusion five minutes before, which somehow gave her words an extra sting. "Sure," he said. "I'll just march in and ask him."

"Why not?" she said. "If you won't, I will."

She would, too. "I'll take care of it," he said, aware that he was sounding like a sulky child. "First thing tomorrow."

She eyed him coldly. "I hope so," she said, turned on her heel. "I'm going to wash this ink off my hands."

He was staring out the window when he heard her come out of the bathroom. He braced himself for another verbal

whiplash. Her tone, when she spoke, was utterly unexpected—anxious, uncertain, very close to frightened:

"Eric, look at this."

She was holding a cheap calendar with a color photograph of a winter forest above the thirty-one days of January. Friday the nineteenth had been marked in black pencil—but not, he saw, in an ordinary way. Someone, presumably Magdalen Tyrrell, had circled the date, over and over, digging the pencil point in the same meticulously narrow track until the paper had been torn through in an almost complete circle around the number.

"It was hanging on the back of the door," said Diana.

"I think we have a target date," Eric said.

"No, Magdalen does—five days from today," Diana said. "But what's the target?"

33. Kenny

U.S. Highway 70; noon Sunday

He shifted on his seat, trying to ease the familiar, throbbing ache that was rising out of his bones. Not much time left. It was a thought he wouldn't allow himself to think until about three weeks ago. Now he could let it into his head—now that he had something to lose. No, that was just kidding himself. He couldn't lose Magdalen because he'd never had her, not really. Nobody did. Probably nobody ever had.

When she woke up, he thought, she was going to have a hell of a headache. The kind of headache that felt as if someone were pounding a cold chisel straight into her skull, just above the eyebrows. But right now, curled up across from him on the front seat of the station wagon, her face was peaceful. In fact, she looked kind of like a teenager, with her freckled, almost chubby face, her reddish hair tucked up under her cap.

One thing she didn't look like was a killer, but in Kenny's experience looks meant nothing. The most cold-blooded assassin he'd ever served with was a nineteen-year-old corporal who could (and sometimes did) pass as a sixteen-year-old girl. Like

him, Magdalen had the two things that set killers off from the rest of the world: she did not really give a damn about anyone, and she'd discovered that once you blew somebody away, they were out of your face forever.

She didn't love Kenny Ballard, he knew. Oh, she needed him, admired the things he could do—even liked him, the way she might like a pet. But when it came to the crunch, she'd go on her way without him. He was just a convenience in her life.

So why am I in love with her? he asked himself. There was no answer, though. There never was.

"What're you thinking, Top?" She had come awake during his thought, and he could tell, from the way her eyes were slitted, that the postbennie headache was hitting her hard.

There were still a few things he could do for her, he decided, and nothing to gain by putting them off. "I was wondering how you planned to set up the four-deuce for your big moment—because," he continued, "a moment's about all you're going to have."

"What d'you mean?" She was all attention now, and bristling a little, too.

He stared down the endless straight highway, gleaming bright with last night's melted snow. "Where you planning to shoot from?" he asked. "You remember what I said you needed."

"Cover, a solid footing, a clear trajectory, and a place to watch the fall of shot from," she said.

They were his own words exactly, but memorizing lines was part of her training. The question was how well she understood. And then how well she could execute. "What's your main problem?" he asked.

She was ready with the answer—or at least with the words: "If my cover's good, I won't be able to see where my ranging shots fall."

"And how're you planning to handle that?" He was almost

sure what her answer had to be, and she didn't disappoint him.

"You," she said. She managed a smile that would have glowed, if her eyes hadn't been so tired. "I'll need to have you up somewhere with a clear view, calling my shots." And before he could object, she added, "By telephone."

"Good," he said. Radio would be fatal—in D.C. there'd be scanners panning across every frequency, with direction finders to back them up. But an ordinary open telephone line, on a local call, would be as safe as you could get in a city that large.

"I was thinking of putting the gun—sorry, the tube—on a flat roof, but I figured that'd be too obvious."

"Just a little," he agreed dryly. He shifted his body again. "Figure on a sky full of choppers: police, army, air force, Secret Service . . ."

"Then I thought of a top-floor studio, with a skylight," she said. She was watching under her lashes for his reaction.

"Not bad," he allowed. "They'd have to fly right overhead to see what you were up to. Trouble is, they might."

"Yes," she agreed. "That was when I remembered a studio I was in once, down in the Village. The owner was a landscape painter, and he had a big shade he could pull across the skylight. He painted a scene on it—blue sky, puffy white clouds, birds."

Kenny didn't get it for a minute, but then he saw what she was driving at. "I didn't know you could paint," he said.

"I can't, but I know how to find someone who can," she replied.

* * *

She was behind the wheel now, with two Tylenols and a pint of black coffee in her. "That's Ohio, just over the hill," she said. "What comes after Ohio?"

Kenny had started shivering again, but with the sleeping

bag wrapped around him, he was pretty sure she couldn't tell. "Tiny sliver of West Virginia, and then you're in Pennsylvania."

"Pennsylvania," she echoed. "We're almost there."

"That's one way of looking at it," he said. He let a few minutes of quiet slip by, just the wet whirring of the tires and the slap-slap of the wipers. "What about afterward?" he asked.

"Lie low for a while, then move to another country," she said. "There's somebody who'll help me—who'll have to help me."

Somebody else you're getting even with, Kenny thought. "I meant right afterward," he said.

"Oh, that." She seemed unconcerned. "I expect things will be pretty confused. I thought I'd just walk out while everybody runs around in circles. They won't have any reason to stop me."

He laughed. "Pretty confused isn't good enough, Magdalen. With what you're planning, they are going to stop *everybody*."

"Maybe they can stop everybody," she replied. "But they can't arrest everybody—not the whole inner city. If I can't talk my way out, I deserve to get caught."

"And me?" he said. "How do I get away?"

"You don't." She was smiling coolly. "You just stay put. Two days, ten days, however long it takes for things to cool down."

He was about to point out that he probably didn't have that long, when their eyes met and he realized that she knew.

* * *

Pittsburgh looked as if somebody had taken it half apart and forgotten how to put it together again. The effect was so depressing that their determination to drive through the night suddenly failed, and they took a motel room just to the east of the city, off the highway that was now 70 and 76.

"It splits about a hundred miles east of here," Magdalen was

saying through a mouthful of soggy French fries. "Highway Seventy goes south to Baltimore, but we go straight on to Harrisburg. Pick up Seventy-eight, and sail on in to the Big Apple."

Kenny was in a daze of fatigue streaked with pain that came and went. "We don't want to be in New York any longer than we have to. Just touch and go."

"We only have to pick up our stuff at your place," she said. "No way the police could connect Brick to you."

"Not worried about ol' Brick Wahl," he said. "I was thinking about that guard in Wichita. The hospital's got your credit card number."

"They've got Magdalen Tyrrell's card number," she said. "And that was absolutely Magdalen's farewell appearance on this earthly stage. I've been paying cash since then. Besides, it's the same situation as with Brick: there's no visible connection between you and me."

She was right—or at least Kenny couldn't see any hole in her reasoning. All the same, he wished he could think more clearly. Some link between them did exist, but he just couldn't put his finger on it.

34. Diana

8:30 A.M. MONDAY

The resolution Diana had been suppressing when she went to bed was clear in her mind when she awoke and inescapable by the time she poured her second mug of coffee. But since what she intended probably meant the end of her career, she would think it through one more time while walking to the place of execution.

Not that she was shying from confrontation; at this point she had to consciously restrain herself from dashing out the door, leaping into a taxi, and riding off in all directions. Whenever the choice boiled down to flight or fight, Diana knew too well, her almost invariable instinct was to charge. There'd been a term for it in the back rooms of State Department Intelligence: *die Flucht nach vorn*—flight to the front. "The hussar reflex," Troubridge had called it. She wondered if Eric had his own term for it.

As she strode down Third Avenue, cleaving easily through the stream of office workers trudging the other way, she found herself unable to lock on to the problem. She was acutely aware

of the chill, dead air, streaked alternately with diesel bus exhaust and the acrid smell of last night's restaurant garbage; of the watery, heatless sunlight (it would give way to clouds and then rain, CNN had warned, as the storm moved in from Ohio); even of the background blur of sound—beep, honk, squeal, roar—usually inaudible to a Manhattan ear.

But the events of the past week refused to assume a pattern she could analyze—or, rather, they kept shifting their collective shape, like a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces could form half a dozen different pictures. It was, of course, the classic intelligence predicament: she was missing the one keystone piece of information (or two or six) that would position the rest in place. At least she knew the question she had to ask, even if asking it got her fired.

At 42nd Street she turned west. The Rajah's real headquarters—as opposed to the glittering Trump Tower front that Channing & Co. displayed to the world—was a single floor in one of the anonymous buildings that stood shoulder to shoulder around Grand Central. Faded modern, not quite shabby, with its narrow lobby squeezed between a truly dreadful coffee shop and a camera store that had been running the same "Going Out of Business!" sale for the past three years.

There was no human starter for the single bank of elevators, but carefully hidden cameras swept every inch of the plain lobby, which was embellished by faded posters of Mexico in the dusty window of a travel agency that was never open. The Rajah's elite guard had offices on the third floor, but the elevator would stop there only if you'd been told to push the three button twice in quick succession. When the door opened, you stepped into a boxlike waiting room with not a stick of furniture. A wall speaker invited you to state your business, and if the metal detector and the overhead cameras decided they approved of you, the single door would open, and you would enter—suitably escorted—the maze of offices from which the Rajah's empire was controlled. To see the Man himself, you had to win the approval of a succession of functionaries, each

of whom seemed intent on proving that you should never have gotten this far.

That, at any rate, was the routine for handling regular visitors already known to the staff. For the blue-moon stranger, entry was considerably more difficult. Only if you were part of headquarters itself or, like Diana, one of the Rajah's handful of satraps could you pass through the blockade with relative ease. Even then you could count on at least one human barrier between you and the Rajah. Today it was Bernie Plunkett who appeared, seemingly out of the wall, to stand in her path.

"Good morning, Diana," he said, rubbing his small fat hands together. "I was wondering who'd be first, you or Eric."

Diana was familiar with Bernie's in-house pose—a sort of knowing obsequiousness, like someone who was constantly apologizing for having read your mail. It was meant to annoy, and thus to unsettle, but if you refused to take it personally, you could move ahead quite quickly. "Then you know why I'm here," she said. To her own ear her voice sounded unusually chilly, the side effect of suppressing the quaver that she could feel forming in her throat.

"Unwise," said Bernie, glancing nervously about him as if the walls had ears. And of course they did. "Also premature."

You never knew what the last straw was going to be. "Premature?" she snarled. "Jesus, Bernie . . ."

He must have seen her teetering on the brink of a bottomless indiscretion. "No, no, no," he murmured urgently, grabbing her by the arm. She allowed him to pull her into one of the unmarked chambers that lined the corridor. A conference room, to judge by the plain table surrounded with not-too-comfortable chairs. Thick carpeting and floor-to-acoustical-ceiling shelving, jammed with comfortably worn books, gave the illusion of coziness while deadening echoes on behalf of the presumptive microphone.

He shut the door—a solid, well-oiled click—and put his back to it. For a long minute they eyed each other without

speaking. Diana found herself editing the tirade she had entered the room with. Again Bernie seemed able to see what was going on in her head: "You can speak freely in here," he said.

You asked for it. "One: Magdalen Tyrrell is already a multiple murderess." As Diana said the final word, she let her eyes drop momentarily to Bernie's hands, saw them clench into fists. "Two: She's threatened to kill five hundred and forty-six more people, and there's no reason to think she won't do it."

"Oh, the fatal number—" Bernie objected, but she rode him down.

"Fatal is the word, isn't it?" She acknowledged his weak grin with a nod and drove in for the kill: "Three: My employer and yours has some intimate connection with this woman, but he won't admit it. He's using Eric Szabo"—she paused for half a beat, saw the fisted knuckles whiten—"to shield himself from what she's doing. But he's made Eric's job impossible."

"Curious it's not Eric who's complaining," Bernie said in a flat voice that allowed almost any interpretation of his words.

She was ready for that diversion: "You're Eric's friend. Can you imagine him complaining . . . about anything?"

The little man colored slightly. His smile, when it came, was genuinely sweet. "I think you've become his friend, too. Is that why you're here?"

"No," she said. "I'm here on my own behalf."

"There's a feeling in certain quarters that you've . . . inserted yourself unnecessarily," Bernie observed, his eyes on the books to one side of her head.

Certain quarters meant only one person; Diana was surprised and dismayed at the extent of Bernie's information. But there was no retreat from where she'd placed herself. Only forward. *Nach vorn*. "This Magdalen Tyrrell has gone out of her way to involve Wild-Freeman's name in whatever she's up to. If it's something really big and messy, it could damage the company. My company—and Roger Channing's."

In this building, invoking the Rajah's actual name was a signal that the speaker was ready to go to the mat in whatever struggle was taking place. Bernie understood that shorthand. He said, "What do you want?"

The trouble was, she wasn't exactly sure. "Who Magdalen Tyrrell is, in relation to Himself."

"No." Bernie shook his head once, decisively.

"I could find out for myself, but there isn't time."

"I'm sorry, Diana." He seemed to mean it. "I can't tell you."

"Then tell Eric." She hoped the desperation she felt wasn't showing in her voice.

"I can't tell him, either."

"Then let me see the Man. I'll do my own asking." She sensed him wavering. "Bernie, this woman has killed a U.S. congressman and her own lover. Four days from today she's going to do something a whole lot more spectacular."

"Four days from today?" Bernie was clearly jarred. "That's the nineteenth. Why then? How do you know?"

But Bernie was a lawyer: feed him one detail and he'd nibble it to death for hours. "Never mind," she said. "We know. The point is, are we going to let her, or do we go to the cops? Or do we stop her ourselves?"

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew she'd pushed too hard. "You say she killed her lover," Bernie said slowly. "Can you prove it?"

God, how she hated the legal mind. "Of course not."

"And this congressman," Bernie continued. He sounded peevishly disapproving, like the ancient prune who'd tried to teach Diana how to write in Spencerian capital letters. "I assume you mean Fielding of Arkansas. What proof—"

The answer had been assembling itself in her mind ever since she'd tracked down the front-page stories about old Hound Dawg's murder. Now, suddenly, all the pieces fell into place. "Her clothes," said Diana. "The clothes Tyrrell was

wearing when she broke his neck. She hid them in her lover's apartment. I've got them."

There was no need, she saw, to elaborate. No need to threaten, either. They understood each other perfectly. Bernie had the excuse he needed—the excuse he could give the Rajah if Diana and Eric screwed up. "Let me tell you a story," he said.

* * *

"A daughter," said Diana, almost to herself. "I knew about the son, but I never heard of a daughter."

"No one has," Bernie said. Diana had the feeling he was already regretting his confidence. "The son is legitimate, of course. That makes a great difference."

The son was also a harmless academic butterfly, Diana had heard. A collector of Ivy League diplomas. "Even so . . . ," she began.

"And the girl has been a problem from childhood," he continued. "It was clear she inherited her father's will, but not his sense of direction."

Or grew up without anyone to give it to her, Diana thought. "You're telling me Magdalen Tyrrell's some kind of genetic loose cannon?"

Bernie sighed heavily. "When I first was informed about Miss Tyrrell," he said, obviously feeling his way, "I assembled all the information about her my predecessor had kept—school reports, surveillance, already a probation report—and I showed them to a professional I could trust. . . ."

"A shrink, you mean."

"A psychiatrist of international reputation," Bernie said severely. "He would not commit himself, of course, but one very unsettling term came up."

"Sociopath," said Diana. She saw the stunned look on Bernie's face. "Twenty-twenty hindsight, of course. Did you tell Himself?"

"Well, not exactly . . ."

I wish I'd been a fly on the wall at that interview, she thought. "Hell, Bernie, I probably wouldn't have got as far as 'not exactly,' " she said. "He didn't want to know, right?"

Bernie shrugged. "He's a very proud man, our employer. He already saw that his son was unlikely to succeed him . . ."

"So he wrote her off."

"She was already involved in . . . suggestive theater. Grossly suggestive. He found it repellent." He hesitated. "Yet he still sees her as his daughter. . . ." Took the plunge: "Yes, he loves her. Unwillingly."

She found herself surprised, paused to examine it. The Rajah had always seemed to her a vast force of nature, like continental drift, only quicker. In the last few days he had acquired first jealousy and now revulsion and parental affection. She was not sure if the discovery made him more human or just less godlike. At some future time she'd have to consider all that. Now there were more immediate matters to deal with. "So he still wants her protected."

"I believe so. Yes."

But he hasn't said, and you haven't asked. "All right," she said. "How much of this can I tell Eric?"

She had known the answer before she asked: "None of it," he snapped.

You're almost where I want you, Bernie, she was thinking, when he surprised her for the second time.

"So you've got to stay involved, Diana. I can't make Eric take my word for things anymore, but I think he'll take yours. You have to keep him pressing on, without asking the wrong questions."

She could see in Bernie's eyes a little of what his speech had cost him: You're turning the man you love over to a woman he almost loves—and who doesn't love him. However this ended, she knew she would never laugh at Bernie Plunkett again.

* * *

Joy Summer seemed on the verge of hysteria, which meant that she was mildly concerned. "The woman's desperate, Diana. I mean, she's called every five minutes since nine A.M."

"She leave a name?" asked Diana, scanning the small drift of backbiting memoranda, self-serving reports, irrelevant carbon copies that the morning interoffice mail had produced. None of it was earthshaking, she decided.

"No. Said she'd keep calling."

"Then I expect she will. Want some coffee?" Diana's offer had nothing to do with notions of equality (which she conspicuously lacked) and everything to do with Joy Summer's coffee, perhaps the worst in the known galaxy.

"Well . . ." The phone rang, and before Joy could move, Diana fielded it.

"That you, sweetheart?" she said.

"Somebody's sweetheart, I hope," said a deep bassoon of a voice. "But the sweetheart you're talkin' about had to go to work, so she asked me to call you direct."

Diana's burst of laughter almost escaped her control. "By God, Woody, you're the best thing I've heard today."

"You better have your ears checked, then," Woody Dawkins said with a bubbling chuckle. "Anyhow, I had to promise your fair white body to three different people, but I've got what you wanted."

"That's great," she said, "but I asked Xenie—"

"Thing is," he interrupted, "I couldn't cart any of it off. Or even write it down. All in my head, so you'd better get a pencil, gal, and start writing, before it slips away."

"Better than that," she said. "I'm going to tape you. You may fire when ready, gridlock."

"Comin' at you," he said. She could hear him draw a deep, organizing breath.

35. Magdalen

86th Avenue, Queens; 10:30 a.m.

She swung the station wagon in along the curb, a couple of feet behind Kenny's parked van, which had accumulated a layer of streaky gray cinders. She switched off the ignition, and the engine died with a series of ominous thumps. "We made it," she said. She felt oddly alert, knew it was mostly illusion on a bedding of caffeine. Her eyeballs, which felt as if they were set in hot gravel, were a more accurate record of the hours behind the station wagon's leaden steering wheel.

She was alone on the front seat. Ever since Pittsburgh Kenny had been stretched out in back, sharing the air mattress with the cardboard tubes. As he had pointed out, if anything went wrong with the shells, it wouldn't matter where you were inside the station wagon, you'd be D.E.A.D. Besides, it reminded him of simpler days: "When I first joined up," he said, "if a recruit dropped his weapon, he had to sleep with it. I spent a lot of hours cuddling my M-16."

The rest had done him good. Gaunt and bearded as he was, his eyes were brighter, clearer, than they'd been since they'd

flown west—was it only four days ago? He stretched out a hand, patted her cheek. "Don't go into shock just yet, Magdalen," he said. "We got some brisk winding up to do."

He was right. She pushed open the driver's door; somewhere along the way it had acquired a shriek that sounded as if the metal were about to rip. As she swung her legs out, she decided that her knees felt the way the door hinges sounded.

She had not seen Kenny's neighborhood in daylight before, or else she'd been too preoccupied to notice it. Low, red-brick apartment buildings lined one side of the street, confronting a straggling row of two-family homes with pointy gables and tiny, fence-enclosed front yards. The whole area was the peculiarly dead gray of New York in winter. From Queens Boulevard, two blocks away, drifted the noise of traffic—the same trucks and cars and buses as in Manhattan, but a different sound to Magdalen's ear. Smoother, somehow; less of the roar and squeal she remembered. Maybe it was the absence of taxis. She shook her head, walked stiffly to the back of the station wagon, and opened the gate.

* * *

Kenny halted a step from his apartment door, and Magdalen, just behind him, waited. She watched as he bent forward and plucked off something that seemed to be stuck to the lock. He held it up, grinning.

"It looks like a hair," she said. Her brain felt as dull as her voice sounded.

"It is a hair," he replied. "Saw this trick on a TV spy movie. You stick something small—a match, a hair, whatever—on your door, so it'll fall off if anybody disturbs it. Then you know if you've had visitors while you were out."

"Oh," she said. She couldn't remember ever being this tired, a state in which the word *drained* was so totally accurate.

He unlocked the door, motioned her in. "Let's hustle, Magdalen. Pack up and move out."

She stared helplessly at the neat row of her luggage, most

of it still unpacked. Something was nagging at her memory, and at last she extracted it. "Maybe you'd better be careful with that name, Top," she said. "We buried Magdalen back in Wichita."

He was emerging from the bathroom, his cupped hands overflowing with plastic pill bottles. "For sure," he said. "When anybody's around, you're Mary Tolliver. But when it's just the two of us, you'll always be Magdalen to me." He grinned at her, and she felt the warmth and force of him energizing her.

So very close, she thought. This is the way I used to think I'd feel about my . . . The word was there, but it refused to form, even in her mind. Roger Channing had a lot still to answer for, she decided. And he would.

* * *

She was staring at the small heap of crumpled papers on the nightstand next to the bed, trying to decide whether they would flush without jamming the toilet, when he called, "You want to see something?"

"Sure." In some ways, she thought, all men were little boys: when they did something clever, their first thought was to show it to a girl. "What is it?"

"Come here." He was in the bathroom, looking pleased with himself. "See anything unusual?"

She was clearly not supposed to see anything unusual, and anyway, a medium-size elephant could have walked through without much chance of her noticing it. But he expected a reaction, and she gave it to him. "No," she said slowly. "No, I don't, Top."

"How about the cabinet?" he asked.

Its mirrored door was closed, and she reached to open it, but he caught her hand. "Don't touch." He smiled. "I rigged up a little surprise."

"Surprise?" she echoed. Something unpleasant, from his tone.

"For anybody snooping around in here," he said. From a cardboard box on the toilet seat he produced what looked like a metal baseball, with a shiny lever along one side. "Ever see one of these?"

I am really too goddamn tired for games, she wanted to say. "Never. What is it?"

"M-67 fragmentation grenade. Roscoe had a carton of these in his pickup, so I helped myself." He held it up. "See, the lever is held in place by a pin, with a ring at the end for your finger."

"I get it," she said. "Pull out the pin, the grenade explodes."

"Nope," he said, clearly delighted at her mistake. "When you pull the pin, all you do is arm the grenade, free the lever to spring loose. When you throw it at the bad guys, the lever pops open, starts the fuse."

"I'm sorry, Top," she said. "I'm just too tired."

His grin faded by only a few watts. "Thing is," he said, "once you pull the pin, it also makes a nifty booby trap. If you can find a place to prop it so something holds the lever closed."

"Like the cabinet door," she said. "I get it. But why?"

She saw he was ready for that one, too. "While I was lying in the back this morning, snuggling up to those cardboard cylinders, I got to thinking about ol' Harley. Far as I know, there was only two parts to his life—acting and the army. If I was a detective, looking for his murderer, I'd start checking into both parts."

If only it wasn't so hard to form the simplest thought. "But this"—she flicked a finger toward the cabinet—"just draws attention to you. Assuming they come up with your name in the first place."

"When they look at people's records who served with Harley," he said, "my name will for sure come up. But this booby trap," he continued in quite a different tone, "this is really a present from me to you."

Now she saw what he was getting at—and that he was

waiting for her thanks. Drawing on acting classes long forgotten, she allowed a warm, shimmering simper to form in her eyes and flow down to her mouth. Grateful appreciation was easy, and because she almost felt it, she could add an overlay that looked very much like love.

It was what he wanted, she saw. His eyes fixed hungrily on hers. When the phone in the living room jarred the silence, she wasn't sure if what she felt was relief or disappointment.

What he felt, clearly, was alarm. Though she hadn't moved, he put a finger to his lips. The phone rang for nearly a minute before it stopped. "Let's roll," he said, his voice urgent.

"What's wrong?"

He was looking at the phone as if it could bite. "Damn near nobody calls me," he said. "And those who do know that I answer by the third ring if I'm here. Call like that might be a little test probe, to see if the coast's clear." He started for the door, pocketing the grenade he'd been holding.

"Are you taking that?" she asked.

He patted his pocket. "If anything goes wrong, from here on out, I'm going to make sure they don't get me for free."

The idea had a certain appeal, if only as a last resort. Before second thoughts could overtake her, she said, "Got one for me?"

He smiled approval. "In the station wagon. And speaking of the wagon, I think it's time we made it disappear."

She followed him out the door, wondering dully how he planned to accomplish that.

* * *

It turned out to be surprisingly easy. Kenny first recruited a trio of hulking neighborhood teenagers, who seemed to regard him with an almost religious awe, to carry the luggage to his van and then to shift—"*Gently*, dudes"—the cardboard tubes and their air mattress to the other vehicle. The whole load was carefully stacked and wedged to keep it from shifting,

after which Kenny presented each of the boys with a $20 bill and suggested they forget they'd ever seen him or Magdalen.

When the boys had vanished, seemingly even more pleased at being part of their hero's conspiracy than by their reward, Kenny turned to Magdalen. "Can you push that thing another five miles?"

"Just about," she said.

"Good. Follow me." He climbed behind the wheel of the van, and Magdalen observed that despite his smile and air of assurance, he was moving slowly and stiffly, like an old, old man. She felt nearly as ancient herself as she slid into the far too familiar driver's seat of the station wagon. But I'll get over it, she thought, and, a second later, What he's doing should be tearing my heart out. I almost wish it were.

The van moved at a sedate pace onto Queens Boulevard, then south to slip into the traffic stream of the Van Wyck. Just as Magdalen was beginning to wonder if Kenny planned to abandon the station wagon somewhere in the desolate reaches of Kennedy Airport, he turned off onto the westbound Belt Parkway.

A mile or so later, in a part of eastern Brooklyn that to Magdalen was as foreign as Bulgaria, the van bumped off onto the narrow margin of dead grass beside the parkway. Forgetting to signal, Magdalen yanked at the station wagon's wheel. She felt the thump of the curb right up through her spinal column, and the wagon slewed to a halt in nearly frozen mud.

A slight rise of ground hid the road from the shabby, mostly wooden houses beyond, and the midmorning traffic sped by in clumps. Kenny swung down from the van, carrying a screwdriver and pliers, which he handed to Magdalen. "Get the plates off," he said.

The rear license plate offered no problem, but untold slow collisions with parking lot barriers had welded the front one into its holder. At last Magdalen had to bend and rebend it until it ripped free, leaving a few shards behind.

"Good enough," said Kenny, who had been checking the interior. "By tomorrow morning the doors and wheels'll be gone, and by the weekend you won't even be able to tell what make it was."

"Good-bye, Old Paint," Magdalen said, and to Kenny, "I hope to hell you don't want me to drive."

"Not for a couple of hours yet," he replied. "By then we ought to be where we're going." He put the van into gear, slid easily into the traffic heading for the Verrazano Bridge, New Jersey, and south.

36. Eric

NOON

I am almost in love, he thought. It was a familiar state, though not one he'd enjoyed recently. And he was not enjoying it now—or not as much as he usually did, even though the object of his almost affection was sitting beside him.

Fifteen minutes earlier Diana had summoned him out of the editorial department's weekly meeting in a fashion that was not only high-handed but appallingly obvious: the conference room door had opened, without a knock, to reveal Joy Summer, even more California than usual in a set of flowery pastel tights under a nearly transparent capelike garment that seemed to float around her.

It was enough to turn every head, and Haskell, caught up in a flaming argument with Tim Mark about advance payments, simply stopped in midinsult, his mouth gaping. Into the still-vibrating silence, Joy's slightly breathless words fell with the force of boulders: "She wants you, Eric. Now."

As he followed Joy—she was fairly loping down the corridor, at any other time a sight worth savoring—Eric heard the

massed voices of the department rise behind him. The collective tone was clearly outrage, but he knew it would soon be followed by ravening curiosity.

"What's up?" he called to Joy's retreating back.

"I don't know," Joy said over her shoulder. "She's on the phone to some guy, and he's reading her what sounds like a personnel sheet."

The late Harley Wahl's army records, Eric thought. Maybe even the mysterious Kenny, AKA Top. But when he burst, panting slightly, into Diana's office, he was in time only to hear her say, "Thanks a million, Woody. And I may mean that literally." She looked up, her face slightly flushed, and said, "Get your coat. I'll meet you in the lobby."

Now, as their taxi groped toward the Midtown Tunnel, Diana said, "We've got a live one."

"Kenny or Harley?" said Eric, trying not to sound huffy.

"Definitely Kenny," she replied, glancing sidelong at him. "Look, I'm sorry about yanking you out of that meeting. . . ."

He thought of the look on Haskell's face and felt his annoyance dissolve. "Your secretary is a pretty high-profile messenger. They won't forget it."

"Oh, dear." Her slightly hawklike beauty wasn't suited to contrition, he decided. Nor to the sound, very like a giggle, that escaped her. "Haskell can be so pompous," she said. "*Maman*—my mother—calls him *le grand mouton*."

Diana's mother had made a single visit to Wild-Freeman a few weeks after her daughter's arrival. That had been three years ago, but the tiny, imperious Melisande Louise Christiane d'Arcy, vicomtesse de Kerain, had instantly passed into house legend, with (Eric suspected) even more than the usual embellishments.

"Well, we can worry about that later," he said. "About our friend Kenny . . ."

"A considerable person," Diana said, and he saw that she intended the adjective in its broadest sense. "He was first sergeant of the late Harley's company in the army, and then

sergeant major of the entire post. I gather that 'sergeant major' is something pretty special—my informant is a colonel, and he sounded impressed."

Eric rummaged though his memory in search of a meaningful parallel. "The head of the Wild-Freeman mailroom," he said at last, "raised to the power of five." That wasn't quite strong enough, of course, but it was in the ball park.

She got the idea instantly, as he'd known she would: "Sees all, knows all. Little formal power, but God help you if you get on his wrong side."

"That's the man," Eric said. "And God help the army if a man like that goes bad."

"As Sergeant Major Kenneth Isaiah Ballard apparently did, though the army could never pin anything on him. To hear my . . . friend tell it, Ballard and his buddies managed to sell about half an armored division to a foreign power before anyone caught on."

"A hostile foreign power?" asked Eric, thinking that he'd heard similar tales in the navy, and some of them turned out to be true.

"No"—Diana laughed—"a friendly government. That was what annoyed Washington so much: they were trying to sell the same matériel to our enemies, and just when they had the deal nailed down, they discovered there was nothing left to deliver. It had vanished, never to reappear."

"And Ballard got away alive? No wonder your army friend was impressed," Eric said. The taxi dived into the echoing darkness of the Midtown Tunnel, and he raised his voice above the whine of the tires. "So Harley Wahl was part of Ballard's ring or gang, is that it?"

"More like a hanger-on. Somebody they tossed crumbs to," she shouted back. "But he seems to have killed a man, an officer. It looked like an accident, so he was never prosecuted. They managed to squeeze him out of the service, though."

Eric sat back in the taxi, trying to fit the new fragments of information into some pattern, but they only made the

puzzle larger. Magdalen Tyrrell, he reminded himself, was still the unknown center. Clearly Diana had not confronted the Rajah about her, which didn't fit Eric's picture of the woman he thought he was coming to know. The woman he was on the verge of falling in love with.

The taxi burst out of the tunnel, and Eric blinked in the sudden light. "You haven't told me why we're hurrying out here," he said.

"No, I haven't."

He did know her well enough to recognize a standard gambit, the purchase of a couple of seconds' time while she organized her thoughts. But why did she need to?

"Just once in this operation," she said, "I'd like a look at one of the other players before he disappears or dies."

Not good enough, he thought. Not even close. "So we're rushing out to gape at the opposition?" he said. He didn't bother hiding his derision, and he felt her bridle. Still, it took her several more seconds to speak again.

"Actually, no. I thought we might be really lucky and pick Magdalen off on the fly, so to speak."

Now he was genuinely astonished. "Kidnap her?" he said before he could stop himself.

"Pas devant l'enfant," she snapped, nodding toward the driver.

"Oh, he hears worse every day," said Eric, and, raising his voice, added, "Don't you?"

"Absolutely," the driver replied without turning his head. "Say, lady, is this place off Queens Boulevard somewhere?"

"Haven't a clue," she said. "Queens street addresses are the world's last unbroken code."

Eric was not going to be deflected: "Still, a snatch . . ." And then the answer came.

Her cool smile told him she had read his face. "Maybe she's just been keeping bad company. We might be able to change that."

Protect her, he was thinking. That's still the assignment,

and if Diana's this sure of it, she must've got her instructions directly from the Rajah. His mind raced, adjusting what he knew to fit the situation. And, he noticed, she did not interrupt his thoughts.

"Stop here," she called to the driver.

"A couple more passes and I'm sure we'll find the place," he protested.

"No thanks. Here is fine." She pushed the money, with tip, into the slot.

Standing in the street, with the wind whipping bits of scrap paper around his ankles, Eric looked wistfully after the disappearing taxi. "What did you do that for? We'd be a lot less conspicuous scoping out the neighborhood from behind a window."

"Not from inside a taxi," she said. "Haven't you noticed? There's not another cab in sight on these back streets. We might as well drive around in a pumpkin pulled by mice."

She might be right—hell, she *was* right—but at least a pumpkin would be out of the icy wind. Grumbling, he followed as she strode down a schizophrenic road, lined with small, shabby houses on one side and low, shabby apartment buildings on the other.

At the corner she took his arm, but almost before he had given her hand a companionable squeeze, she was whispering in his ear. "Next block over and back one," she was saying. "We'll stay on this side of the street."

He beamed at her. "What are we?" he said between clenched teeth. "Newlyweds looking for an apartment?"

"I trust I'd never be mistaken for the kind of person who'd consider living here," she replied.

She was safe, he decided. You didn't need to know women's clothes to realize that what Diana carried on her back was worth more than any of the cars parked along the curb.

"That's the place," she hissed. "The awning with the tear in it."

The faded lettering read *139–19 BRIARWOODE AR S.*

Did an unsung humorist live here? Eric wondered. "We'll take a swing past, check for a doorman," he said.

"Doorman?" Incredulous scorn in a single whispered word. "Check for some guy in an undershirt, with a three-day beard."

"Him, too. Come on." The lobby was empty, as he'd expected, and only three-quarters finished, though the building itself must have been at least ten years old. From the corner of his eye he saw a woman with a two-wheeled shopping cart cutting diagonally across the street toward the awning. "Quick, we'll scoot in with her," he said.

Never missing a step, Diana pivoted with him. "Not so fast," she whispered. Then, as he slowed, "Like that."

Her sense of timing, as he might have known, was perfect. The shopper had the door half open, pushing the heavy glass with her shoulder as she tried to drag the loaded cart through behind her. Eric grasped the edge of the door. "I'll hold it for you," he said, but not too warmly.

The woman gave the cart a yank that threatened to overturn it. She was regarding Eric with suspicious eyes as Diana demanded, from her off side, "Say, did you sign the complaint yet?" She was not attempting a Queens accent, but her voice was bullying, just under strident.

"Maybe. I don't know," said the woman, blinking with indecision.

"I didn't think so. Well, you've got to sign it before tonight," Diana said firmly.

"Won't do any good," the woman muttered, edging toward the elevator.

"I've got a copy someplace," said Diana, rooting in her shoulder bag.

The elevator door slid open. "Later," said the woman. "I got to put this stuff in the freezer."

"I'll wait right here," Diana said as the door closed. And in an entirely different voice: "She won't even stir out of her apartment till she's sure we've gone."

Eric regarded her with unfeigned awe. "What complaint?" he said. "And how did you know?"

Diana shrugged. "In these buildings, there's always a complaint going around. And she was right: it never does any good." She was watching the elevator indicator. "She lives on six, and the apartment we want's on two."

"I don't suppose you've got a key," he muttered, following her onto the elevator.

"You mean you forgot your knife?" she said.

Neither was necessary. The door to 2-R was unlocked, signs of a hasty departure everywhere: drawers half open, one sock—a man's medium—on the floor, the refrigerator full (but the milk quite sour). On the dusty, uncarpeted living room floor were narrow marks that looked as if five suitcases, of neatly graduated sizes, had sat in a row along the wall for several days.

"I'll do the bedroom and the bath," Diana said. "You check out here."

As Eric searched, he built a mental picture of Kenneth Ballard. It did not include anything like five suitcases, and certainly not a matched set. Obsessively neat, a reader of secondhand paperback thrillers, and what else? The smell, he decided. He drew in a deep breath. A sick man lives here. There was a smell that went with serious illness: generalized medication, disinfectant, and, later on, sometimes, an actual whiff of physical decay. He couldn't detect the last, but the first two were clear enough. And the bottles in the fridge—three kinds of liquid antacid, a powerful laxative, a pint of unlabeled dark green pills of enormous size—confirmed his impression.

But there'd been nothing like this in Wahl's studio or in Magdalen's own apartment. Preliminary deduction: Kenneth Ballard himself was the sick man. Eric closed the refrigerator and, on an impulse, stalked across to the bathroom.

Diana was just ahead of him, and he was looking over her

shoulder as she opened the mirrored cabinet door. He heard the clear, metallic *ting*, saw a bright glint spin in the air, and then recognized the dully painted globe as it rolled slowly off the narrow shelf, dropped toward the sink below.

His arm shot out to catch it as his shoulder slammed Diana into the wall. He heard her gasp, but his eyes were frantically scanning the tiny room. For a moment his heart died in him, and then he saw the narrow, painted-over window behind the shower curtain, above the tub.

The globe was heavier than it looked, and he thought he could feel a dreadful mechanical stirring inside its guts. With his free hand, he smashed the glass out of the window, then tossed the globe through the jagged hole and dragged Diana to the floor, all in one movement.

He heard, from below, a solid thud of something hitting pavement. Under him Diana was all knees, hips, and elbows. She squirmed around to look up at him quizzically. "Do you find this approach works with many girls?" she asked, just as an unseen giant gave a coughing roar, lifted the entire building six inches, and dropped it.

37. Diana

They lay unspeaking as the building settled back, groaning, and a shower of plaster dust and fragments dribbled from the ceiling. When it stopped, Diana gasped, "I apologize," just as Eric said, "I think we'd better get out of here."

He was undoubtedly right, she thought, but he seemed to be having some trouble clambering to his feet. He had his left hand jammed into the pocket of his old army coat. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Sure. Come on."

He didn't look that well, but few people were improved by a coating of plaster dust. In the hallway she closed the door firmly behind them, checked the lock to make sure it had caught. Eric was already punching the elevator button. "Not the stairs?" she asked.

He shook his head. In the hallway's oddly tinted lighting—could they be leftover Christmas tree bulbs?—his face was a dusty pink. "Looks too furtive," he said.

An uncertain crowd was accumulating in the lobby. The explosion had dislodged two slabs of cheap marble from the unfinished wall, and they lay shattered across the floor. Onlookers were

nudging the pieces gingerly, as if they might come to life underfoot. "What happened?" Eric said to the first person who looked at them. "We were in the elevator."

The man—presumably a tenant—shrugged ignorance. Diana caught sight of the woman who'd seen them enter the building. She was in agitated conversation with a man wearing a coverall, and it could only be a matter of seconds before she saw Diana and Eric.

But Eric, without seeming to move his feet, had traversed the entire lobby. Diana hurried to catch him. In the street neighbors were standing around, many of them staring nervously up into the thin overcast. "If ever we needed your taxi technique . . . ," Eric murmured.

"On Queens Boulevard," she said, taking his arm.

He winced; she glanced down and saw why his hand was in his pocket.

* * *

Eric was rocking gently in the middle of the kitchen—the only uncarpeted room in Diana's apartment—when she entered carrying a plastic box labeled FIRST AID. He was still wearing the coat, now disfigured by a dark reddish stain spreading down from the left pocket, and holding his left hand up in the air as if taking an oath.

"Looks as if the bleeding's stopped," she said, setting the box on the counter.

"I think it's just running down my arm," he replied. "What's in that bottle?"

"Peroxide," she said, tearing a fist-size wad of cotton from a larger roll. "Hold your hand over the sink, while I have a look at it."

She swabbed away the half-dry blood, crusted with coat pocket detritus. He must have smashed the window with the heel of his hand, judging by the bruise that was darkening the area, and then gashed his palm nearly to the bone as he pulled back.

"I didn't dare try to throw that grenade through the glass," he observed in a muffled voice.

"No," she agreed. "It could've bounced back, and then . . ."

"Smeared all over Sergeant Major Ballard's walls," said Eric. "Any idea how bad it is? I can't feel much of anything."

She glanced over her shoulder. He was staring rigidly at a corner of the kitchen ceiling. Under the dusting of plaster, his face was a waxier white. "Can't stand the sight of blood?" she asked.

"Only my own." He dropped his eyes to hers, but not an inch lower. "So what's the verdict?"

"Offhand, I'd say you'd cut yourself, but you could get a second opinion." She saw he was not amused. "Let me wrap this up for the moment, then we'll take you to somebody who can stitch you back together."

"Stitches," he said. "Do you think that's really necessary?"

"You're a real pussycat, aren't you?" she said.

* * *

Cleaned up, his elevated left hand wrapped in snowy bandage, Eric was stretched out on Diana's couch, wearing her father's old bathrobe. The color had returned to his face, and, she thought, he was looking altogether at home.

"I was just thinking that if I keep winding up here, you may have to rename this room the Eric Szabo Memorial Wing," he said. "What're you thinking?"

She took a long, cool, soothing swallow of New Zealand white before answering. "I was wondering why the hell he did it—if that booby trap was Ballard's, not Magdalen's."

"Oh, it was his all right," Eric said. "Very professional, very GI. But why?" He shook his head. "Beats me, unless he was hearing footsteps and they made him jumpy."

"Maybe it was her idea," Diana offered. "Maybe she's the one hearing footsteps."

"Could be. We're sure they're together."

It was, she thought, less than half a question. And it triggered her recollection.

"Not only are we sure they're together," she said, unfolding herself from the big armchair. "We have a pretty good idea where they've gone." She went to the closet, returned with a handful of papers that had been crumpled and then carefully flattened. She selected the piece she wanted and dropped it on the coffee table, dropping to her knees as she explained.

"These were in a little pile in the bedroom, almost as if somebody set them aside, then forgot them in the hurry of leaving. I only got around to checking them out while the doctor was working on your palm. This is the one that says it all." She was spreading the sheet as she spoke, saw she had the wrong side, and flipped it over. "That's better. What do you think?"

She watched his face as he considered it. His concentration was impressive, she thought: his tired brown eyes, suddenly sharp, seemed almost to be drawing the pattern up off the paper. "Plain vanilla Avis street map of central D.C.," he said. He was talking to himself, not her. "All the major tourist attractions." He looked up at her. "You saw this penciled line?"

"Oh, yes," she said, and his eyes dropped back to the paper. The line, drawn with a medium-hard lead, traced a smooth arc that swept from the intersection of New Jersey Avenue and E Street, around behind the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress, to trail off, indecisively, in the Capitol Hill district. Eric seemed barely to be breathing, and Diana finally could not restrain herself. "Did you notice the writing?"

He nodded. Two words—or a number and an abbreviated word—printed in the middle of the Mall: *700 yds*. A different pencil, she thought. Softer lead, not as sharp a point. "And you see the connection?" she asked.

A ticking minute's silence, and he exploded: "Of course!" He picked up the map, held it to the light. The pinhole showed clearly even from where Diana knelt. He set the map

down again, measured a distance using his blunt forefinger. When he looked up he was smiling. "The arc was drawn with a compass. There's no scale on this damn map, but the radius certainly looks to be about seven hundred yards."

He seemed reluctant to go on, so she prompted, "And the central point is the Capitol Building."

"More specific than that: spang in the middle of the west wing. Is that the House or the Senate?"

"The House," she said. "Ideas?"

He sank back on the couch. "Too many." He seemed to hesitate. "Look, was it the Rajah you talked to this morning?"

She knew what he was edging toward. "No, Bernie. The Rajah is still off-limits, and Bernie's trying to drive this project without putting his own hands on the wheel."

She watched the information sink in. "What does Bernie want?" he asked.

Your success, as much as anything, she thought. "He's feeling his way. But he seems pretty certain that the Rajah's going to keep protecting the Tyrrell woman."

"So we can't just drop this turkey on the police," said Eric.

"Not if we want to stay gainfully employed."

"Just who is Magdalen Tyrrell, anyway?" he asked, so quickly and casually that she might have answered, had she known.

"Bernie refused to say," she replied, and added, "But I'm having Joy check her out, via that theater program you showed me. That may tell us something."

"Well, maybe you can keep flying blind, but I can't," Eric said, sitting up abruptly. "Can I borrow your phone?"

"In the bedroom," she said. She went into the kitchen, began putting her first-aid kit back together while listening to Eric's voice, which he made no attempt to lower.

"The Caribbean?" he was saying. "When did he leave? . . . Oh. And he'll be back when?"

Bernie, of course, she thought. And he doesn't want to talk to Eric.

"What do you mean, 'can't be reached'?" Eric was saying. "Just tell me where he is approximately, and I'll track him down myself."

He sounded tired and frustrated, Diana thought. There's no way he can catch a Bernie who wants to stay out of his reach. A wave of compassion swept her without warning. She set the plastic box on the counter and stepped quietly into the narrow hallway.

Eric was standing with his back to her. He was holding the phone in his right hand, his bandaged left hanging loose at his side. Diana could barely hear the Donald Duck quacking of Bernie's secretary at the other end, but the sag of Eric's powerful shoulders told her what he was hearing. "All right," he said. "Tell him I called, please." He set the phone down gently and murmured, "Fucking Caribbean," under his breath.

"I think you've got to choose between flying blind and not flying at all," Diana said.

He turned, squaring his shoulders as he did so. His face was flushed and angry. "Then—"

She kept right on: "And I'm voting for blind flight."

That stopped him, at least for a few seconds. He considered her, his head to one side. "Your job?" he said, and answered his own question: "That's not the issue. Why, then?"

"Because something about this scares me," she said, trying to infuse her words with the certainty she felt. "If I don't follow Magdalen Tyrrell, I'll spend the rest of my life regretting it."

He was, she saw, taking her seriously, his brow furrowed. "So we go to Washington," he said slowly.

"That's where it's going to happen," she agreed, ignoring the relief that bubbled in her veins.

He nodded. She could see there was something he needed to say, and she waited quietly. "You know Washington," he began, and ground to a halt.

"So do you," she said.

"I used to. But when we get there, it's going to have to be your operation. Don't get me wrong"—he held up his good

hand before she could speak—"I'll do what I can, give you my best advice, but your name is the one on the wrapper."

She was mystified. He didn't sound like a man dodging responsibility, but how else could she interpret his words? "If you say so," she said.

"I do." His crooked smile looked almost genuine. "Trust me on this one."

She wanted to. She very nearly could. "We'll play it your way," she said.

The distinction wasn't lost on him, she saw. The smile remained, but the warmth in his eyes dimmed.

"And don't give me that goddamn lost puppy look," she snapped.

Her tone rocked him back, exactly as she'd intended, and his face hardened.

"Because the one thing I never do is go to bed with a man who's feeling sorry for himself."

He stood absolutely motionless, like someone who couldn't believe what he'd heard, until she had undone the first three buttons on her blouse. And then he said, his voice soft and a little hoarse, "The one thing I don't feel is sorry for myself."

38. Magdalen

Washington, SE Sixth Street; Tuesday afternoon

The studio was almost square, a big room nearly twenty-five feet on a side, looking immense and bleak without a stick of furniture in it. The bare walls showed unfaded rectangles of paint where the previous tenant had hung pictures, and the windows looked out over a gray expanse of rooftops that stretched into the distance.

The landlady, whose name was Webb, followed Magdalen's speculative gaze. "Mr. Diddleton found the view very inspiring," she said brightly. "He used it in many of his landscapes. Of course," she added as Magdalen remained silent, "it looks a lot different in summer. Leaves and things. Green, you know."

In mid-January, Magdalen thought, it was a landscape that only a suicidal cubist could love. She looked up at the many-paned skylight. Plenty of leaves there—dead ones, wet and black, from several consecutive winters. "You said the skylight doesn't open?" she asked.

Mrs. Webb had not spent her life in Washington for nothing:

"Technically, it opens," she said. "It is an opening skylight, just like the advertisement says. But we keep it inoperative, because of the leaks. You might say it's a nonfunctional opening skylight." She stood ready for Magdalen's understanding acceptance, and her own slightly anxious smile faded slowly.

"This is what makes it work?" said Magdalen. The wall plate was painted red, and a piece of paper was taped to the plaster above it: DO NOT TOUCH! in red crayon letters. For illiterates, a strip of black electrician's tape had been pasted over the switch itself.

"I think so," said Mrs. Webb. "I mean, if it still works, that's what works it. But if you open it once, it leaks around the edges forever afterward."

Magdalen forced her features into a dissatisfied expression, when what she really wanted to do was shout in triumph. As a compromise, she let a shred of her exhilaration escape in a grunt. "Does the shade work, at least?" she demanded.

"Oh, the shade's just fine," exclaimed Mrs. Webb. "The shade is almost new." To demonstrate, she yanked at the cord, which ran from a cleat on the wall through two pulleys and across the expanse of glass. Then yanked again. With a squeal of protest, the shade jerked its way across the skylight, plunging the studio into deep gloom. When Mrs. Webb released the cord, the shade snapped back with such force that the roller jumped out of its brackets.

By some miracle it landed, its interior springs still spinning, in Magdalen's arms. Wordlessly she set it down on the bare planking. Now that she looked, she could see a water stain—three stains—a dozen. The skylight certainly leaked.

Mrs. Webb had assumed a martyred look. Clearly she thought the deal was stillborn. "Mr. Diddleton . . . ," she began.

"Which way is the Capitol?" asked Magdalen.

"The Capitol? Right through there," said Mrs. Webb,

as if the seat of government were on the other side of the room's bare wall. "You can walk there in five minutes," she added.

Seven minutes and five seconds, Magdalen corrected. Not counting the traffic light. But the real question was angle of fire. In every other respect the studio was absolutely perfect, but it might be a little too close for the four-deuce. Well, Top would make it work.

"You couldn't see the Capitol even if there was a window on that side," Mrs. Webb was saying. "The Library of Congress is in the way, you know. But it's a very beautiful building, too—the library. If you could see it."

It was indeed, Magdalen thought. And even more beautiful as a shield: from the Capitol, Mrs. Webb's small apartment building was quite invisible; there was no reason for anyone to consider it a source of danger.

Mrs. Webb seemed to have decided that Magdalen's silence might be a positive sign. "Would you like to see the bathroom?" she asked. "It's surprisingly large. Mr. Diddleton set up a little kitchen in it."

"No thanks," Magdalen said.

Mrs. Webb's face fell. "It looks a bit bare now, of course. But it can be quite cozy with pictures on the walls."

Magdalen knew she ought to negotiate, but it was a process she'd never had patience for—and there was so much left to do. "I'll take it," she said.

"You will?" Mrs. Webb's face betrayed something close to astonishment, then slid into an expression of pinched avarice that was far more natural. "Well, that's very nice. Now, about references . . ."

"Mrs. Webb," said Magdalen, "I want to move in by Thursday." She saw the other woman stiffen and caught herself. Get into the part, she ordered herself. I am a very important person. A government appointee. Things happen the way I want them to. "Look," she heard herself say—sweet as saccharine, firm as granite, comforting as chicken soup—"the department was

desperate to have me to start one Feb. Their idea, not mine. So I closed up my place in Boca Raton, sent everything to storage, and came straight up here. And when I arrived yesterday, guess what?"

Mrs. Webb was visibly delighted at this personal glimpse into the world of power. "They fouled up," she said. "They always do."

"Exactly," said Magdalen. "My appointment is going to be confirmed—formally confirmed—this afternoon. But did they find me a place to stay? No. Office furniture? Forget it—the stuff that's there must have belonged to Grover Cleveland. A secretary, even?" *Watch it*, the inner voice warned. *Over the top is only inches away.*

Or maybe not. Mrs. Webb's black eyes were snapping with fascination. "Oh, I know how it is, dear. Target date slippage, the curse of the District."

"Target date what?" said Magdalen.

"Slippage," said Mrs. Webb. "Means it's late."

"What a useful phrase," Magdalen said.

"You're going to hear it a lot, in your work. And just which . . ."

"Agriculture," Magdalen said firmly. It was a huge building, after all. There must be thousands of people in it someplace.

She saw she'd guessed right. "They're the slowest of all," crowed Mrs. Webb. "It's the seasons or something."

"Probably. But I still have to move in Thursday," said Magdalen.

Fifteen eternal minutes later it became clear that in Washington, as in Manhattan, two persons of goodwill could surmount many obstacles, especially if enough cash changed hands. Magdalen replaced her rapidly thinning wallet and picked up the rolled skylight shade. "A pleasure, Mrs. Webb," she said.

"Oh, I'll take care of that, Miz Tolliver," the landlady objected, reaching for the shade.

"Not at all," Magdalen said. "You've been too sweet already."

Mrs. Webb's face twisted into a smile that looked as if it hurt. "I'm know I'm going to love having you here, honey," she said. "Tell the truth, Mr. Diddleton was something of a trial."

"Is that so?" said Magdalen, her attention on getting through the narrow door with the rolled-up shade. "How did he come to leave?"

"Feet first," said Mrs. Webb. She regarded her new tenant with sly amusement. "He killed himself. He was an artist, you know."

* * *

Shoals of bored, noisy schoolchildren swirled back and forth outside the Capitol, herded ineffectually by their exhausted teachers. Up the steps ran a barely moving ant trail of tourists, waiting for their momentary look at government in action. A cold drizzle had stopped only moments before, and the umbrellas were gradually disappearing.

Counting under her breath, Magdalen paced toward the vast pile of stone. As it loomed over her, she found it harder and harder to concentrate on what she was doing. She had to look down at the ground, watch her booted feet stepping off the distance, clear her mind of the rising passions that threatened to possess her. At last her right foot swung out and touched the lowest step, and she stopped, pulled out the pocket notepad Kenny had bought for her, and carefully printed *912 yd to bottom step* on the blank page.

She replaced the pad in her pocket and allowed herself to survey the scene. Take a good look, suckers, she thought. She wondered what was going on inside the vast building. Nothing, really: the usual carnival of egos. What's-his-name—Stoughton—was probably in there. And his slimy assistant, Weasel. Or maybe Stoughton was in his big office, screwing his

staff, or in the official motel, screwing some helpless petitioner. Well, it didn't matter. In three days and a few hours he was for sure going to be right here. They all would.

A fat-faced child was looking at Magdalen with too much interest. She hated children, especially on the stage, where they were even more unpredictable than animals and nearly as messy. She turned her back to the steps. Put her heels together and began to pace back the way she had come, counting the steps.

She came again to the end of the asphalt, stepped carefully over the tape that restrained the tourist lines, and continued across the muddy lawn. From the corner of her eye she saw a uniformed guard trying to catch her attention. She ignored him, continued her pacing a little more quickly. He started toward her just as she came to the end of the grass, swung over a low wall onto the sidewalk. She kept moving, and sure enough, he fell back, his attention now drawn by something else.

Outside Mrs. Webb's building, she pulled up, noted the distance—915 yards this time, but close enough—and turned the notebook's pages back to her master list. Kenny had written it out for her, in his neat printing. She ticked off the last item, *Exact distance on foot (note route on map)*, and breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

The apartment was set, the telephone hookup scheduled for Friday morning, the window shade in the hands of a scene painter recommended by a friend at the Kennedy Center, the six thick carpets ready for delivery Thursday afternoon. Kenny had found his own vantage point in the apartment of an old army buddy who was delighted to exchange a weekend's use of the place for a round-trip excursion flight to San Juan.

The Avis car pulled up silently at her elbow. "All done?" Kenny's voice was an old man's, and she had to freeze her expression before she could allow herself to look at him. He was running on some kind of superpowered drugs, but he'd assured her he was good through Saturday night.

Magdalen pasted the smile to her face, turned to the car. "All done," she said.

"Next stop Jersey, then," he replied. "You better drive."

She paused then, her hand on the car door handle, and scanned the neighborhood. Here shall we pitch our tent, she thought. Even here in Bosworth Field.

39. Szabo

WASHINGTON, D.C.; WEDNESDAY MORNING

There could be, Eric thought, no other place in the world as anonymous as the big hotels around Washington National Airport. From the outside, the glass towers all looked exactly the same. And inside, too: the rooms were the same size, with the same boring furniture, wallpaper, pictures; they even smelled identical, a muted chemical odor that was probably supposed to suggest cleanliness.

When he'd mentioned it to Diana, though, she had perversely observed that she found the sameness convenient. "I always know where to find the Kleenex box," she said. "Set into the bathroom counter, just to the right of the sink. That's all I really expect of a chain hotel."

She was as prickly as a porcupine—had been since they'd arrived in Washington twenty-four hours before. At first Eric had put it down to what he privately called "morning after remorse," which often had a strength directly proportional to the success of the night before. Going by that rule, he reflected, Diana should have been suicidal: in a sexual career that now

spanned a quarter of a century, Eric had never encountered a bedmate like her—passionate, demanding, imaginative, superbly accomplished, and all of it under iron control. But what drew him on was the near certainty that Diana Speed was making love at the very edge of abandon, that there was a far wilder country the two of them might explore, if she would only release herself.

He wasn't entirely sure he was up to it, though. She had an athlete's strength as well as an athlete's coordination and no reluctance about employing either one. He still ached in at least four surprising places, and it was all he could do to keep from limping.

She, on the other hand, seemed untouched; renewed, if anything. And while Eric could wrench his thoughts from sex only with difficulty, she seemed to have put that side of their relationship quite out of her mind, to the point of insisting on separate rooms when they'd checked in. And last night, after a baffling, unproductive afternoon and a dinner of plastic chicken breast served (as the menu noted) "in its own au jus," she'd looked at her watch and said, "I'm going to spend the evening thinking this whole thing through. I'll call you in the morning when I wake up."

Which had been five-thirty. Now it was nearly ten. She had been on the phone for the better part of an hour, running Wild-Freeman at long distance. Eric wondered just how many of the people she'd spoken to even realized she'd left New York. Certainly she never mentioned it, and the only hint was her standard instruction: "If I'm out, leave the answer with Joy."

She hung up, but before Eric could get a word in, she was talking to room service: "A fresh pot of coffee, please. Hot, this time. And freshly brewed." She listened with visible impatience to the voice at the other end. Then, icily precise, she replied: "I certainly hope so, because if it isn't, I'm going to pour it right on the carpet." She replaced the handset. "I will,

too," she said to Eric, and unveiled the sudden, impish grin that made his heart turn over.

I would do anything for you. But he knew better than to let his thought appear on his face. "Through with New York?" he said.

"For the nonce," she replied. She sat back on the hotel's preposterous desk chair and crossed her long legs. "How long is a nonce, by the way?"

She was just clearing her head, he saw. "Two jiffies, three point four twinklings," he said, deadpan. "I think we'd better go back to that map."

"At least that far," she said. She opened her briefcase, a black leather Mark Cross special that raised understatement to stratospheric heights, and pulled out the now familiar Avis street map. Yesterday afternoon they had walked every inch of the territory enclosed within the penciled arc, and they were none the wiser.

"The arc represents a limiting distance. That much I'm still sure of," said Eric. "A maximum range of seven hundred yards—funny number."

"Funny how?" She had mastered the art of totally neutral questioning: neither challenging nor supportive, her queries allowed a respondent perfect freedom of reply.

"I'm not quite sure, but it's long for . . ." He stopped himself. "I'm assuming that the center of the arc—the House of Representatives—is the target of something. Rather than the point of origin."

"Agreed. Our camel is pissing into the tent, not out of it," she said.

He grinned and continued: "Given that the House is the target, seven hundred yards is a little long for a sharpshooter with a rifle." He saw her lips purse and paused for her question.

"Even with a telescopic sight?" she asked.

"Really, yes. That far away, there are too many accidents of windage for really reliable shooting. You could take out a

window easily enough, maybe not a person behind the window."

She steepled her long fingers in thought. "The target has to be inside?" she asked.

The discreet knock of room service. When Eric answered the door, he saw in the eyes of the young man with the coffeepot that he'd been informed of Diana's threat. Eric tipped up the lid and sniffed. "Okay," he said, and signed the check. As he poured the coffee, he considered Diana's question and, as he handed her the cup, answered it: "I think so, unless Magdalen Tyrrell plans to butcher about twenty busloads of tourists peacefully standing in line."

"A hecatomb of Iowa schoolchildren," Diana said. "But it could just as easily be a Right-to-Life demonstration. And there's no way you get a guaranteed five hundred and forty-six." She sipped the coffee, saw his raised eyebrows. "Yes, it's hot, and yes, it's freshly brewed. If I wanted a flavor, too, I guess I should've specified." She set down the cup. "You said something about a limiting range, Eric. Does seven hundred yards have to be an upper limit? Or could it be a distance the shooter doesn't want to get any closer than? If you follow me."

He sat back, more jolted by her question than he was ready to admit. It seemed unlikely, but she could be right. "I just don't know," he confessed.

"No reason you should," she replied. "Let's consult an authority—no." She set down the phone. "I think we need to start from farther back. What are the givens?"

The next two hours, Eric thought, were as demanding as the night he'd spent in Diana's bed, though not nearly as pleasurable. Together they examined everything they knew about Magdalen Tyrrell, Harley Wahl, and Kenneth Ballard—listened to the tape-recorded military records of the two men, delivered in a deep, honey-smooth bass that was clearly accustomed to public speaking and belonged (Eric guessed) to a black army officer.

At the end of the tape, Diana, who had been pacing restlessly up and down the room, said, "I need a break. Do you play squash?"

She might as well have asked if he played harpsichord. "Squash? No. Why?"

"Because this hotel has a squash court," she replied. "That's why I chose it." She was slipping out of her slacks and sweater as she spoke, but her manner made any sexual overture inconceivable. Even stripped to bra and panties, her body might have been a stranger's. And perfect as it was, it might have been made of marble.

As Eric watched, she took from her suitcase a pair of white tennis shorts and a polo shirt, a pair of white wool socks, and high-topped sneakers. "The thing about squash," she said, double-knotting the lace, "is that in a pinch you can always play with yourself." She straightened up, every inch a snow queen, and shattered the illusion with a broad wink. "You may watch, if you like."

For forty-five minutes she went at it nonstop, alternating back- and forehand smashes that sent the deadly-looking black rubber ball ricocheting like a bullet off every wall in the boxlike court; just when she seemed to have settled into a choreographed rhythm, she would break it with a series of half volleys, almost too fast for Eric to follow, and then suddenly the ball would sail slowly, lazily upward into one of the two front corners, kissing both walls and dropping like a shot bird to the floor.

He watched from a balcony above and after about half an hour found himself joined by a pair of young men in shorts and sweatshirts. They were carrying squash rackets, and one of them said something that made the other laugh. Just then Diana, who had been standing flat-footed, drilling one drive after another straight down the center of the court, shifted gears and began to brush high, looping strokes off the side walls, exhausted-looking shots that spun crazily as they hit

the floor. Somehow she seemed to know exactly which way each spinning ball would jump, positioned herself perfectly to send it on its way again.

She finished with a succession of flat smashes, played off the back wall, and drove the last of them into the metal guard with a clang that echoed around the court. The young men exchanged glances, and the one who'd laughed said, "Maybe I won't, after all."

* * *

The red message light on the telephone was blinking as they came into Diana's room. "See what that is, would you?" she said. "I've got to get under running water instantly."

A package for Ms. Speed, the desk said. Fed Ex from New York. Should they send it up?

Eric was inspecting the label when she emerged from the bathroom. She had brushed her wet hair straight back, and for some reason it made her look like a high school girl. "Do you know a George Spelvin?" he asked. "It sounds familiar, somehow."

After a moment's bewilderment, comprehension cleared her face. "I have a feeling that's Bernie being elfin," she said, reaching for the padded package. "Feels like a book." She shook it. "No, a videotape." She grasped the end of the cardboard pull tape.

"How sure are you it's from Bernie?" Eric asked, putting his hand over hers.

She froze. "Another patent medicine from the cabinet of Dr. Ballard?" Her voice sounded utterly calm. "It sure feels right for a videotape."

"Why don't you let me open it?" said Eric. "In the navy they taught us some things about unsolicited gifts."

He was a little surprised when she agreed to stay in the bathroom while he opened the package. "It does seem to be a videotape," he called. "No message enclosed. Label says 'Property of CNN.' "

She was already at the phone. "Desk? This is Ms. Speed in 805. I need a videotape player, please."

* * *

"So that's Magdalen Tyrrell," Eric said five minutes into the tape.

"Shut up and listen," said Diana.

The tape was raw footage, Eric decided. A gavel-to-gavel recording made for the record, with practically no technical grace notes: the camera locked on to each speaker in turn and only in dead spots panned across the packed hearing chamber or across the stony faces of the subcommittee.

At his side, on the end of the big double bed, Diana sat with her legs under her. He could feel the tension in her building as the late Representative Fielding closed in on his victim. Once Eric turned to make a comment, but the words died in his throat when he saw the naked hatred on Diana's face.

She must have recognized his shock. "Fielding," she said, her voice low and cold. "All of them are loathsome, but he's indescribable."

"You knew him?"

"I met him. My . . . the man I was married to considered Fielding a great populist. William Jennings Bryan returned to earth as a hog." She shook herself. "I'm sorry, Eric. I thought I'd got over politicians."

Judith Sanders had told him, but he couldn't remember the name of Diana's congressman ex-husband. Eric, who had met a few members of both houses, had never encountered one who needed to be taken seriously. As he watched Fielding, he began to revise his opinion.

Suddenly Diana uncoiled herself and leaped from the bed, punched the VCR's "stop" button. "See there?" she exclaimed. "Second row from the back, on the aisle?"

The subcommittee's lawyer, a vulpine creature whose name Eric had missed, was assembling some exhibit, and the camera-

man had taken the opportunity to look at the audience's faces. Diana was tapping the frozen screen, and Eric leaned forward. "Bernie, by God."

* * *

Diana snapped the seal on the too small bottle of Courvoisier from the minibar. The sharp smell made Eric's mouth water, though he detested brandy. She held the bottle over a tumbler filled with minuscule ice cubes. "I don't know whether to drink this or wash in it," she said. "Those bastards make me feel dirty all over."

Eric selected a can of ginger ale and popped it open. Too damn sweet, he decided. It would taste a lot better with Canadian Club in it. "If you'll pardon my saying so, that seems kind of a strong reaction."

"Oh, it is," she agreed. She drank off a healthy gulp of cognac and shuddered. "The contempt of familiarity, I suppose. I ran my ex-husband's reelection campaign," she added. "It was a way of doing my wifely duty while avoiding the marital bed. The night he won, it dawned on me what I'd done, what I'd foisted on the electorate. And he was one of the less gruesome examples—still is."

"Why do you suppose Bernie Fed Ex'd that tape to you?" Eric asked, embarrassed at the raw emotion he could see her holding back.

"Motive," she said without an instant's hesitation. "Did you see what that . . ." She inhaled slowly, let the air out. "What Fielding did to her?"

"And so she snapped his neck for him," said Eric. "That seems to even things up."

"Maybe," Diana said. "Maybe so. But what if Fielding's performance snapped something inside her first? What if she still has a lot of getting even to do?"

"I have the feeling Magdalen may not be the only one." The words escaped before he had a chance to consider them. Diana's face went blank, and he braced himself for an explo-

sion. Several seconds went by, and Eric realized he was holding his breath.

"There is that," she said quietly. "Thanks."

He sensed she would explain herself when she was ready, and she did, as they were driving off into Georgetown, in search of a decent dinner. Eric was at the wheel of their rented Honda, driving one-handed, and Diana was staring either through the windshield or at her reflection in it. Suddenly she said, "I know what she's feeling. And I need you to remind me which side I'm on."

"Which side is that?" Eric asked.

"The side of peace and quiet," she said. "Mine."

40. Magdalen

South Jersey; Thursday morning

"Up two," said the crackly voice in Magdalen's ear. "Right three."

She started to set down the handheld radio, then remembered the instructions. She pressed the transmit button: "Up two, right three. Roger," she said. It still sounded stilted and phony, but Top knew what he was doing.

He'd better know what he's doing, she thought as her chilled fingertips turned the elevating knob. She picked up the last of the practice rounds, positioned it over the mouth of the tube, released it, and ducked away.

The solid *whump!* made her gasp, as it always did. She felt the shock of the propelling charge through the sandy ground, up through her knees to the core of her. It was a wonderful feeling, and the only thing missing was the even more wonderful roar and flash of a live projectile exploding.

The handheld crackled. "On target," said Kenny's emotionless, almost inhuman voice. "Fire for effect."

She blinked, picked up the radio. "They're all gone," she said. "We used them up."

She almost didn't recognize his laugh, turned to electronic hail on a metal roof. "Look under the tarp."

The shell was heavier than the practice rounds she'd become used to, with the fins set differently on its body. The letters *HE* stenciled on the casing were big and black.

"Is it real?" she said into the transceiver. "Is it all right to fire it?"

"It's a graduation present," said the voice at the other end, a quarter of a mile away. "Now: Fire for effect."

She didn't hesitate this time.

* * *

"You see the pattern," he called up to her. "Real short at first, and way off to the left, then stepping up to the target round by round."

She was perched, insecurely, on top of the van, whose roof flexed under her every time she shifted her weight. But the height allowed her a clear view of the way Kenny had marked the improvised range—a freshly cut shaft of wood marking each little crater made by the practice rounds. The square canvas sheet that stood for their target had been pegged down at the corners, and the final, live projective had shredded one whole side of it.

"I hope we don't need that many shells to get the real range," she said. "They'll have time to set the whole U.S. Army on us before we can get even one of the sarin shells up."

Kenny laughed. "Sweetheart, you can count on having the en-tire U.S. Army around your ears before tomorrow night is over. But by then it'll be too late."

"You're sure?"

"That was why I had you pace off the actual distance," he said. "That was why we sat up till all hours correcting for the buildings in between, the ones you had to walk around. The

range we fired today is the range we'll use. And now the tube's zeroed in for it. We know just what settings to crank in before we drop the first HE round."

"Then we'll hit the roof with the first shot?" she asked.

"That wasn't what I said." He didn't have much left, and being patient with her was costing him something, she could tell. But this was vital: she had to know. "Leave it this way," he said. "Unless we screw up something fierce, the third round ought to bring down the house. Literally."

Bring down the house. She liked that.

* * *

Magdalen set the van's hand brake and turned off the engine. She turned to Kenny, saw he was holding a bandanna. "What's that for?" she asked.

"My buddies—the ones who sold us the four-deuce—they're kind of shy," he said. "I'm going to have to put this around your eyes, just while they pack things up and put 'em in the back for us."

He waited calmly while all the doubts rattled through her mind. There was, she realized, no choice, not with Kenny in his present state. And if he'd wanted to betray her, there'd been half a dozen places he could have done it already. She swiveled to present her back to him. "Go ahead," she said.

"That's my girl." His fingers were damp and uncertain, but at last he had the red-and-white-flowered cloth secured so that it covered her face from her eyebrows down to her upper lip. The bandanna smelled of him, but not sour and sick and old, the way he smelled now. What filled her nostrils was the real Kenny Ballard, and she found it strangely comforting.

She heard the grating of booted feet on sand—several pairs—and stiffened involuntarily.

"It's okay," he murmured. "There's four of them, and I know 'em all."

She forced her muscles to relax, tried to create from sounds alone a picture of what was happening. It wasn't easy: the men

worked without speaking, except for the occasional muttered "Hold this" or "Like that." Still, her trained ear noted three blacks, all from the Deep South, and a white from the far West. Having broken the four-deuce into its three main components, they were wrapping them in stiff, crackling plastic. The whole operation took no more than fifteen minutes, and then she felt the back of the van sag as it accepted the extra weight.

One pair of boots sauntered up to Kenny's side of the vehicle; a voice—one of the black men—said, "She's ready to roll, Top."

"Well done," Kenny replied. She could hear him strain to put authority in his voice. "Here's what I owe you."

A tearing sound, and Magdalen guessed the other man had opened a sealed envelope. She heard the faint rustle of bills being counted. "You know there's an extra hundred in here?" said the soldier.

"After we've gone, I want you to police this place up," Kenny said. "The range, too. Footprints and everything."

The other man's laugh was abrupt. "We do that anyway," he said. "For ourselves."

"Keep the hundred. For good service."

" 'Preciate it, Top." The voice paused, uncertain. "Go careful, man. You hear?"

"Disappear," Kenny said unsteadily. "I don't want to see your ugly faces anymore."

* * *

As the van rolled southward, he spoke without opening his eyes: "I already made arrangements for getting this stuff upstairs to your apartment. Some guys I ran across."

"Will they know what they're carrying?" It was the question that had been nagging at her ever since the van had rumbled and lurched out of the pine barrens.

"Not a chance," he replied. He sounded genuinely confident, she thought. "These are just kids—brought up on video

games and *The Terminator*. They wouldn't know a weapon like the four-deuce, not broken down the way it is."

"What about setting it up?"

"That's a problem," he admitted. "The way I am, we do need one extra pair of hands and a strong back."

"Is there one of these kids we can trust?" she asked.

He laughed. "These little bastards don't give a shit if we level every government building in D.C. Probably cheer us on while we did it. Trouble is, they might tell their two, three hundred best friends."

He knew the answer as well as she did, but for some reason he didn't want to put it into words. No, she corrected herself: he was testing her.

She stared ahead, unconscious of the Jersey Turnpike rippling up through the steering wheel as she examined the alternatives. In the short time remaining, she was never going to find another Top, probably not even another Brick. Magdalen had no illusions about her ability to vamp men—most found her unsettling, pushy, and not (she had to face it) attractive enough to take a chance for. And the younger they were, the tougher it was to make contact with them.

"Let me ask you, Top: Are these kids friends of yours? Or are their parents?"

She had the feeling he was about two questions ahead of her. Normally that would have been insupportable, but she found she didn't care, because she knew that in the end it was her side he was on.

"They're just your standard kids from the ghet-to," he said, his voice filleting the final word with exaggerated care. "I used to make soldiers out of 'em. These days, it's not worth the trouble."

She had the answer she needed. "There's a rest stop a few miles ahead," she said. "We'll pull in there, get some gas, and I'll change into my government lady clothes."

"Right," he said. "When we get to D.C., you take a taxi

to your apartment. Not a good idea for you to show up in this thing."

* * *

"This here's Akhbar," said Kenny. "I think he's the one we want to help you unpack."

After watching the three young men hump the four-deuce and the projectile tubes up four flights of narrow stairs, Magdalen was inclined to agree with Kenny's choice. Akhbar was the strongest, the most willing, and certainly the dumbest of the trio. The other two, Wilferd and Custis, had a sly cleverness she distrusted on sight, and they'd consistently shirked every assignment.

Now, perversely, they scented a treat and objected at being cut out. From some hidden reservoir Kenny called up a cold, stony dismissiveness that sent the two grumbling down the steps and—watched anxiously by Mrs. Webb—out the front door.

Magdalen had not even turned to the pile in the center of the big room when the knock came. She looked across to Kenny, who had slid into a sitting position with his back to the wall. "Let me handle her."

"She's all yours."

"Come on in, Mrs. Webb," Magdalen said, buttering her voice.

The landlady's suspicious gaze bounced from the pile in the center of the room to the exhausted Kenny to Akhbar, staring vacantly out the window. "I hope I'm not interrupting," she said. "I wanted to be sure . . ."

Magdalen took the woman by the arm and drew her into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind her. "Miz Webb," she began, low and urgent, "I am just curdled with embarrassment."

The landlady was clearly taken aback, but her concerns were still bubbling up, and Magdalen pressed on quickly.

"The fellow sitting in the corner," she whispered. "That's poor Homer—been with my family for simply years. Well, I can hardly let him go, the condition he's in."

"He does look pretty poor," said Mrs. Webb. "I was afraid when I saw him . . . well, you know, these days . . ."

"No," Magdalen said firmly. "Absolutely not *that*. Plain old leukemia is all."

"Thank goodness for that." And a half beat later, "I mean, it's terrible for him, of course, but it must be a great relief for you—"

"You're absolutely right," Magdalen interrupted. "But he said he could arrange to have some of my furniture brought in—the things that already arrived from Boca—and then he turned up with these three young hoodlums. Well, I just didn't know what to do."

"Oh, I know how it is," Mrs. Webb replied. "I see you got rid of two of them, though."

"That's right, and I feel some relieved, I can tell you." Mrs. Webb, she saw, was in the bag. Just one more assurance was required: "Soon as the boy unwraps the furniture, we'll call it a day. I will personally make sure he leaves the premises."

"That's very kind of you," Mrs. Webb replied as Magdalen escorted her firmly to the head of the stairs. "You've got some very . . . unusual-looking pieces there," she continued. "I can't wait to see them unveiled."

"I think you'll be surprised," said Magdalen. "In fact, I doubt you've ever seen anything quite like them."

The front doorbell shrilled, and Mrs. Webb recoiled. "My God, you don't suppose they've come back?"

Magdalen glanced at her watch. "No. That should be the carpet folks. Just on time, too."

* * *

Akhbar rocked back on his heels and stared goggle-eyed at what he had just wrought. "Shee-it," he said. "That mother's a *cannon*."

"Right on, my man," said Magdalen, sighting across the compass she had laid on a copy of *National Geographic*.

"I mean, you got a fuckin' cannon in yo' livin' room," said Akhbar.

"You got it." She looked up from the compass, addressed Kenny, who was still leaning against the wall. "About five degrees to the left, I think."

"Don't think," Kenny snapped, his eyes opening. "Know."

"What you goin' do with it?" Akhbar demanded.

They had bought the compass at a marine supply store in Alexandria. It was as big across as a saucer, with its card marked off in five-degree increments. Magdalen had first gone to the roof to line it up, sighting on the glow from the Capitol Building, then brought it back down to the studio. As precisely as she could determine, the direction to the House of Representatives was due west, 270 degrees from where she knelt on six thicknesses of cheap carpet. The four-deuce, directly in front of her, was cocked just a shade farther south.

"Who you goin' to shoot?" said Akhbar.

"Who do you think? Slick Willie himself," she said, getting up.

Akhbar thought about it for several seconds. "You're shittin' me," he said. "That thing ain't even real."

She turned the horizontal adjusting knob, went back to the compass. There, she thought, that was as good as she could get it. She looked upward at the skylight: once the glass was pulled back, it would be a clear shot.

"Is it?" Ahkbar insisted, turning to Kenny. "Cannon's a fake, right?"

" 'Fraid so." Kenny was looking past the young man into Magdalen's eyes. "But it had you fooled."

"Nah," Akhbar said scornfully. "I knowed it right off."

"Well, you sure are pretty sharp," said Magdalen. As she got up, she felt the comforting weight of the pistol in her shoulder bag. "How about letting us buy you a pizza or something?"

"That be good," the young man agreed. "Here, I give you a hand."

But Kenny pushed him away, almost angrily, and pulled himself slowly, painfully erect.

Akhbar shrugged. "Have it your way, man."

41. Diana

ANNAPOLIS; THURSDAY EVENING

Xenia Dawkins had not changed at all in the three years since Diana had seen her last. She was still a tiny, round, brown sparrow of a woman who would have looked quite natural hopping from branch to branch with a twig in her mouth. Her husband, however, had put on at least fifteen pounds—all of it attached to his hips, like saddlebags. As he sat in his shirtsleeves at the kitchen table, he assumed an almost gourdlike shape that even his trim army greens couldn't hide.

"It's being on staff," Woody said gloomily. "Danish and coffee every time you turn around. I need to get back to the troops."

"Fooey," said Xenie, hovering over the table. "You hate the troops, and you know it."

Diana had the feeling that this was an almost nightly discussion chez Dawkins, but not one she wanted or needed to hear. "I love your house," she said to Xenie. "When did you move out here?"

Xenie surveyed the compact kitchen with unconcealed pride. "A year ago. It takes most of two salaries, but it suits us."

"No kids is what makes a place like this possible," Woody put in. His deep, gentle voice had just the trace of a rasp in it, and Diana glanced across the table at Eric, saw from the tilt of his eyebrow that he'd heard the same bitterness she had. When she looked back to her host, she also saw that another slice of cherry pie had appeared on his plate.

"It's good to see you again," said Xenie. *But why the hell have you dropped in?* she might as well have added.

"Yes, well, I'm in a jam and I need advice," Diana replied.

"The same jam?" Xenie asked. She was standing behind her seated husband now, her head just topping his and her hands, protectively, on his shoulders.

"Extension thereof," said Diana.

"So I suppose it's my advice you want," Woody put in. The pie had vanished, and aside from a small red smear at one corner of his mouth, he looked both businesslike and wary.

"More of an expert opinion, really." She stared pointedly at Eric, who had said next to nothing since the introductions at the door. Who had, now that she thought of it, given a remarkably effective impersonation of the Invisible Man.

"About mortars," Eric said.

Diana had always thought of Woodrow Dawkins's face as Gauguinesque—long, flattened nose, high cheekbones, wide-set eyes. It was also, for a man's, unusually expressive, and she'd never had any trouble following his train of thought. Nor did she now, and she reminded herself that if he'd read Harley Wahl's and Kenneth Ballard's records to her, he'd probably held back some of the juicier, less official bits. Woody's eyes met her own, darted back to Eric. "What about mortars?" he said.

Apprehensive, she thought. Why?

"Ranges, specifically," said Eric. He sounded, for the moment, almost like an academic, and Diana guessed that he was

doing it on purpose. Who took academics seriously, especially in Washington? "Now, obviously a mortar has a maximum range—but does it also have a minimum? I mean, how nearly vertical can you aim the barrel, short of having the shell come right back down your throat?"

Woody rocked back on his chair. He seemed to be processing Eric's question through some sort of internal computer—probably weighing it for secrecy potential, Diana thought. "What are you asking me?" he said. "Angle of fire or minimum range?"

"Minimum range. In yards," said Eric.

Woody shrugged. "Depends on the mortar. U.S. Army's got three in regular service—sixty, eighty-one, and one hundred and six millimeter. Which one we talking about?"

Eric pursed his lips, then said, "I haven't any idea."

"Now, the sixty millimeter does leap to mind," said Woody. "Not only is it the standard infantry mortar, but it has some associations with one Harley Wahl, whom I think you know."

Do we ever, Diana thought. She watched Eric absorbing Woody's probe and decided that if she let the two men skirmish on, it would be tomorrow before they got down to business. And tomorrow was Magdalen Tyrrell's D-Day. "I'm going to cut through the crap a little," she announced.

"I hate it when you say that," Woody murmured. "It's always trouble."

She ignored him. "Is there a mortar with a minimum range around seven hundred yards, and the capacity to punch a hole in a thick roof and kill five hundred or so people underneath? Just hypothetically, mind."

A relieved smile spread across Woody's face. "If you've got something like that, I can get you a pretty good price for it," he said.

"In other words, the answer is 'No.' "

"The answer is 'No,' " he agreed. "The minimum range you mentioned—well, that could be the old one hundred six,

AKA the four point two–inch, or four-deuce to its friends. The book says six hundred fifty yards, I believe. But we're talking small, primitive weapons here. The projectile doesn't have a hell of a lot of punch, it just falls down out of the sky—might penetrate a wood roof, I suppose." He shook his head. "Kill five hundred people? It's just not on, as my British colleagues would say."

"I see," Diana replied. Why don't I feel relieved? she asked herself, but the answer was not far to seek: Magdalen Tyrrell wasn't the person to make such an elementary mistake, and certainly not with Sergeant Major Kenneth Ballard at her elbow.

Woody's apprehensiveness seemed to have vanished, and he was slipping easily into the avuncular mode that suited his personality. But something, Diana thought, was still bothering him, and he kept glancing up at Eric, then shaking his head.

As they moved from coffee to after-dinner drinks—a hideously sweet concoction with the fatal name Irish cream liqueur—Woody's face suddenly brightened. "Eric Szabo!" he exclaimed. "I know that name."

"I'm flattered," Eric said, but she saw that *resigned* might have been more accurate.

"You're the FCC missile, aren't you?" Woody demanded. "I'll be damned."

"Afraid so." He straightened with a sigh, clearly ready for the inevitable.

Woody had turned to Xenie. "I told you about him, hon. It was the beginning of this tour, the first week we were in D.C." He was barely containing his laughter, Diana saw, but Xenie still looked puzzled.

"Feed me a clue, big man," she said.

"The missile in the FCC building," he said, and choked. As Xenie's face brightened in recollection, her husband roared with uncontrollable delight. It was so contagious that Diana, who had no idea what he was talking about, found herself

laughing, too. Even Eric, scarlet to the hairline, allowed a thin smile to stretch his mouth.

"In the *chairman's* office," Woody gasped, and then sailed into another paroxysm of whoops.

"I remember now," Xenie said. "Dominic Stentor. *Doctor* Dominic Stentor, Ph.D. The biggest asshole ever to hit D.C. You never knew him, Diana, but you missed something."

"Apparently," Diana said. "So what's the connection with our Eric?"

"He planted the damn thing," said Woody, and dissolved again. "In fact, he built it."

Five minutes later, after several false starts and no help from Eric at all, the story was on the table: Dr. Stentor, a bureaucrat's bureaucrat, had boasted loud and long, to everyone who would listen, about the impenetrable security system he had created to guard the Federal Communications Commission, over which he presided. At cocktail parties, receptions, other departments' press conferences, Dr. Stentor had made himself a world-class nuisance against world-class competition.

And then one morning an anonymous hand delivered a photo to *The Washington Post*: Dr. Stentor's vast, unmistakable office, with an equally unmistakable AGM-84A Harpoon air-to-ship missile, all 1,100 pounds of it, standing on end beside the desk. The *Post*'s city desk dispatched a reporter, who found the commission in such chaotic disarray that he was able to get a glimpse of the device before the office door was slammed in his face.

"I never saw the story," Diana said.

"It never ran," said Woody. "But, hell, it was Washington. By sundown everybody knew."

"Unfortunately," Eric put in, "by dawn the next day they knew who'd thought it up, too."

"I'm surprised you're not in Leavenworth," Diana said.

"There wasn't even a charge," Eric replied. "Bernie saw to that. But as far as Washington is concerned . . ."

"Nobody, but nobody, in D.C. will come within a mile of Eric Szabo," Xenie said firmly. "Ever again."

"Or anyone who's flying with him," said Woody. He grinned at Eric. "Now, was there anything else you wanted to tell me about this supermortar?"

Diana's spirits had sunk as far as they could go, leaving a small residue of anger. Anger not at Eric, but at herself, for having ignored his obvious reluctance to show himself in Washington. She weighed what she knew about Woody—ambitious, but not the kind of visibly martial leader who could easily make the jump to a star; added her own relationship with Xenie—deep mutual respect, salted with some desperate experiences and watered by real affection; and decided to jump off the precipice.

"Look," she announced, cutting through the after-anecdote report, which had begun to fray out. "I'm going to tell you the whole thing. I just don't want any interruptions."

Woody's smile faded instantly, as did Xenie's, to be replaced on the one face by deep suspicion and on the other by concern. Eric was regarding her with open amazement. And she began.

She left out nothing, calling upon the memory she had trained and cultivated for the past five years. Magdalen Tyrrell's background and record; her appearance before Congressman Hound Dawg's subcommittee; the congressman's subsequent murder; Harley Wahl's desperate phone call to Wild-Freeman—and his now vanished corpse; the grenade booby trap in Kenneth Ballard's apartment; the calendar with its savagely circled date; the cryptic Avis street map. And finally, when she knew her audience was in her hand, she played her ace: Magdalen's relationship to Roger Channing and the equivocal assignment that had led Diana and Eric to Washington.

"What do you want?" Woody said when she had finished.

"Start with a little serious conjecture," she said. "Is there any way—any way at all—that someone with Kenneth Ballard's connections could soup up a mortar so it could blow away more than five hundred people?"

He shook his head. "They don't make nukes that small, and nukes is what you're talking about." His face clouded. "Unless . . ."

"Unless?" she prompted.

"I don't want to say. Not till I have a chance to make a couple of phone calls tomorrow morning."

But he was going to do it, she saw. "Can you call me at the hotel first thing?"

"Maybe not," he said. "The people I need to talk to, some of them are out west. I'll call you when I call you—that's the best I can do."

"I hope that's good enough," she said. "Tomorrow's the day, but we don't know what time tomorrow."

He managed a smile of sorts. "Oh, yes, we do. You told me when—and who. In fact, that's what convinced me to go a little farther out on this particular limb."

It was important, Diana knew, to let Woody trot out his little triumph—not so little, actually. She shaped a pleading expression. "Come on, Woody: I'm hanging by my thumbs as it is."

He relented instantly, as she'd known he would. "It's that number: five hundred and forty-six."

Diana saw, from the corner of her eye, Xenie's mouth drop open. Woody saw it, too, and leaped to rescue his punch line. "How many people in the House of Representatives?" he said.

"Four hundred and thirty-five," she said. "More than a hundred short: I thought of that when we found the map."

"Hush up, gal," he said. "Now, how many senators?"

"A hundred, of course. But still . . ." And then the fog began to clear. As Woody motioned encouragement with the come-hither gesture of a charades player, she said, "Plus nine Supreme Court justices is five hundred and forty-four . . ."

"Plus the president and vice president," whispered Eric, "is a grand total of five hundred and forty-six. But why . . ."

It was Xenie, grinning broadly, who bustled out the back door and returned immediately, unfolding a crumpled newspaper.

"Ta-taa!" she crowed, holding it up so the headline showed: CLINTON READIES STATE OF UNION MESSAGE.

"A joint session of Congress," said Woody. "All of 'em under one roof—under the House roof, in fact."

"Jesus God," Eric said softly. "But what about the cabinet?"

Diana, slightly dazed, shook her head. "I don't expect Magdalen Tyrrell knows about the cabinet. Or cares."

* * *

At the door Woody said, "I don't believe this, mind you."

"I'll wait for your call," she said. "Then we can decide what to do."

He managed a weak smile. "Just tell me again it's not another Eric Szabo prank. I don't want to finish my career freezing my tail up in Fort Drum, checking supplies."

"Fort Drum would look like paradise compared to where my employer would send me," she said.

"Let's go," said Eric, behind her. Only then did she remember how much she'd held back from him until this evening. As she opened the passenger door, he said, "Don't you want to drive, too?"

"Not really." He was an excellent driver, but this was the wrong moment to tell him so.

"Interesting feeling, being a puppet," he said as he backed down the driveway.

"Grow up," she said.

The rest of the trip was in silence.

42. Szabo

Crystal City, Virginia; 7:30 a.m. Friday

At three in the morning he got out of the huge bed, unlocked the minibar, and examined its contents for five long, desperate minutes before closing the refrigerator door and locking it.

At four-thirty he got up again, but this time he removed all the neat little bottles, lined them up in a row, opened them, and poured them one by one down the bathroom sink. The beer was still there, of course, and the wine—but the gesture had achieved its intended effect. He toppled back into the bed and was asleep in minutes.

He awoke from a dream of Diana to the buzz of the telephone. Her cool voice said: "Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate doth sing. Get your dead ass out of bed, tiger."

He hung up and rolled back over. A minute later he sat up with a groan and, thirty seconds after that, heard the knock. He was shuffling toward the door when he remembered that he'd slept naked. To hell with it, he thought as he unlocked the door. And to hell, specifically, with Diana Speed.

Immaculate in a dark suit, every hair in place, she brushed past him into the room, and if she even noticed his condition, she gave no sign of it. "Woody called. We're meeting him at the Pentagon in half an hour." Her eye fell on the empty bottles, in a rigid line across the top of the minibar. One eyebrow rose. She looked him in the eyes, and he saw the dark shadows under hers. "A tough night all around," she said. "Now get dressed: neither of us can pull this off alone."

* * *

In the car, as they squealed out of the hotel lot, he said, "None of those went down my throat."

She was chewing on a huge pastry whose icing looked as if it might glow in the dark. She swallowed convulsively and said, "Of course not." As she emptied a container of juice down her throat, he realized that she meant exactly what she'd said. And that he cared far more than he'd expected to.

"What exactly did Woody tell you?" he asked as he swung the car onto Jefferson Davis Highway.

"Practically nothing," she replied. She had set the empty juice container on the floor and was rooting in the paper bag she held in her lap. "But he's still hooked: that's what counts." She extracted something brown and semicircular from the bag. "Can I interest you in a Styrofoam croissant?"

"God, no," he said.

"All the more for *moi,*" she replied.

A military police sedan, its top light winking, was at the entrance to the Pentagon's vast complex of parking lots, and Eric felt his stomach tighten as a grim sergeant motioned them to the side of the road. But he only looked in Diana's window, asked, "Ms. Speed?" and, at her nod (her mouth was full), said, "Please follow me, ma'am."

The sedan led them around and through one lot after another, to the farthest corner of the complex, still nearly empty this early in the morning. A tall figure in uniform stood alone,

slapping his hands together for warmth, and the sedan drew up and stopped beside him.

He saluted, dismissing the MP's, and turned toward them. As he approached, Eric thought how different he looked from their friendly, unimpressive, somehow soft-edged host of the night before: in full military array (which included, Eric noted, both a combat infantry badge and pilot's wings, as well as the ribbon for a Bronze Star) Colonel Woodrow Dawkins seemed both larger and harder, and he radiated quiet competence. He opened the car's rear door and slid inside, his dark face expressionless. And then his full lips twitched into a wide grin. "Morning, folks," he said.

"Good morning yourself," said Diana, twisting around on her seat to receive his peck on her cheek. "What's so funny?"

"The reason I'm standing out here in the ice-cold dawn like an old scarecrow," he replied. "It's your buddy, here."

"Oh, God," said Eric. "Not still."

"Forever," Woody said. And to Diana: "I made the mistake of feeding Eric's real name into the computer when I was asking for visitor passes. Maybe Saddam Hussein would be less welcome within our august portals, but I wouldn't bet the farm on it."

"You're sitting here anyway," she said. "What's up?"

It was a complex, elliptical story Woody had to tell, and as it emerged in bits and pieces, Eric began to suspect another reason for their interview being held in an empty parking lot, far from inquisitive eyes and ears. There was, it appeared, one way in which an ordinary 4.2-inch mortar might dispose of a really large number of people, especially if they were contained in a closed space: poison gas. "Not that the forces of light use poison gas," Woody hastened to add. But if they did, any one of the nerve gases that had been developed during the Cold War might do the trick.

The army had never considered mortars as suitable for delivering gas, he went on. Their range was too short, and there

was too much danger of the stuff blowing back toward its senders. But civilian higher authority had demanded poison gas shells for any weapon with a range over a mile, and the military, helpless, agreed in principle.

"Of course," said Woody, "we have our little ways of evading really dumb instructions. The tests with mortars weren't successful—killed a bunch of sheep in Utah, and it got in the papers. So that bright idea got shelved, along with the couple dozen leftover projectiles."

Somehow the projectiles had turned up missing. Woody was not to be drawn on that subject, and Diana let it pass. "They still exist, then—but nobody knows where," she said.

"Yes and not quite," Woody replied. "We're not as irresponsible as some people think. We've been keeping an eye peeled for even one of them to turn up, and we'd narrowed our search down to a handful of guys who fence stolen military stuff." He sighed. "Trouble was, all of 'em had rabbis. Very heavy rabbis."

Double agents, Eric thought, protected by whoever was running them—CIA, FBI, even the Secret Service. He glanced at Diana, saw that she, too, had absorbed the implications. "I take it something has shaken loose," she said.

"You got it," said Woody. A major suspect in one of the western states had wandered into an airport coffee shop for no perceptible reason and sat down for a brief conversation with two people who'd just got off a plane from the east. The next morning the suspect had driven off in his heavily loaded pickup—and reappeared twenty-four hours later, with the pickup now empty.

Unfortunately the suspect had eluded his watcher, and the twenty-four hours remained a blank. "This isn't an active case, you understand," said Woody. "We do what we can, but . . ."

"Go back to the people on the plane," Diana said. "Could one of them have been Magdalen Tyrrell?"

Woody's dark eyes scanned the parking lot, which was now

almost half full, before he opened his uniform jacket and took out a smudged and grainy photograph. "You tell me," he said.

Eric's mouth was shaping a reluctant "No" when he heard Diana's quietly positive "Yes." He looked to her, and she said, "Yes," again. "You can change hair and mouth and eyes in a couple of minutes," she explained. "But cheekbones are tougher, and a jawline is a dead giveaway. That's her—but who's the guy with her? He looks half dead."

"More than half," Woody agreed. "We think it's Kenneth Ballard."

"Then it's settled," Diana said.

"Not exactly," said Woody. "It's just too fragmentary, darlin'. How can I take this upstairs, the way it is?"

"And considering who's involved with it." Eric didn't try to hide his bitterness.

"Hey: When you're right, you're right," said Woody.

But you could have told us all this on the phone, Eric was thinking. So, it seemed, was Diana, who remarked: "The man who retrieved those missing gas projectiles—sarin, is it?—he'd be a real star, I suppose."

Woody's smile was cautious. "In this parking lot, 'star' is a loaded word. But yes: applause would be in order."

"No questions asked about how or from whom?" She sounded, Eric thought, as if she couldn't care less.

"That's asking a lot," Woody objected. Diana was silent, her eyes like ice. "I guess it'd be negotiable," he murmured.

Eric sensed the tension in her ease just a notch. "Good, then let's start negotiating," she said.

43. Magdalen

SE Sixth Street; 2:30 p.m.

"You're sure about that compass bearing," Kenny said again. He was slumped back on the driver's seat of the van, and he looked to Magdalen a hundred years old, at least, frail as a ghost.

"I'm sure," she replied. "It's a perfect line—I checked it again last night." But would he last until this evening? she wondered. Would he even make it to wherever he was going to hole up as her fire-control observer?

"Because," he said as if she hadn't spoken, "I'll be watching from North Capitol—right near the train station—so I'll only be able to tell if your ranging shots are short or long. Sideways error I can't estimate, unless"—he sketched a death's-head smile—"you drop one right on the goddamned dome."

"It'll be all right. Really," she said. It was time for him to go. Past time, really: they were setting up barricades down at the end of East Capitol, and the neighborhood was crawling with patrol cars. Part of her wanted him to stay, to help her ride out the familiar opening-night willies.

"Well, I guess it's *hasta la vista*, then," he said, switching on the van's ignition.

"Yes." There was suddenly so much she wanted to say. This was like no other parting she could remember. He was like no other man she'd ever known.

He put the stick into first, took it out. "Adios, really," he said. Then, brusquely, "Kiss me good-bye, Magdalen."

She had to step up to reach his cheek. "So long, Top." There was one other thing she wanted to say, but she couldn't quite manage it. "Talk to you soon."

Another skull grin. "In about half an hour," he said, and the van edged away from the curb.

She watched it out of sight, turned, and went back in. Mrs. Webb was out, so now was the perfect time to attend to the skylight. With the aid of a wobbly stepladder, she replaced the rolled-up shade in its brackets, restrung the pull cord. As she made the last adjustment, a police helicopter *thwock*ed overhead, only a couple of hundred feet above her. She wondered if the pilot could see the 4.2, draped with a tarp from Kenny's van, where it squatted in the middle of the floor.

She pulled the shade across the underside of the skylight, dragging at the drawstring with short, cautious tugs. The freshly oiled roller worked perfectly, but the shade itself was still tacky. "It really shouldn't be rolled yet," the painter had told her. "For Christ's sake, make sure it doesn't get wet."

It was perfect in its way, though not what she'd asked for: a perfectly scaled overhead view of a studio apartment, seen through a skylight. Every floorboard was there all right, but the Kennedy Center scene painter had made a personal contribution, as artists always did unless you stood over them with a whip: instead of the empty room Magdalen had in mind, this one was attractively furnished—Oriental rug, sofa, end tables, a pair of overstuffed chairs, even a coffee table with painted representations of books and magazines scattered across it.

"I wanted to give it a lived-in look," the painter had said

as Magdalen, on a catwalk fifteen feet above, stared down openmouthed. It was amazingly realistic; from a couple of hundred feet it would be undetectable. And there'd been no time to fix it, anyway.

The important thing, she told herself, was that it did the essential job; it concealed her engine of revenge from prying overhead eyes. Like a torero flicking his cape before the bull, Magdalen flicked the paint-spattered old canvas off the mortar. In the artificial twilight it squatted like some primitive god, with its offerings—HE projectiles to one side, sarin to the other—laid out before it. In the grip of emotion too strong to define, Magdalen clasped her hands before her and bowed to it.

Now for the real skylight. This morning she had squirted oil into the dusty, grimy, greasy mechanism until it dripped on the floor below. She had smeared the drive chain with grease, standing on the ladder in imminent peril of life and limb. Even greased the rails and rollers at each side. She already knew the switch itself was live, having flicked it on just long enough to hear an initial groan from the electric motor.

Let's do it. She tore off the black tape, pressed the switch. The motor above her whirred, engaged. The skylight seemed to move a fraction of an inch, then stopped as the motor's whine climbed up the scale. She smelled burning insulation, clicked the switch off. Her hand was trembling. No. No. No, she screamed silently. Not after all this effort.

With the shade drawn, the studio was already dim. She turned on the ceiling lights, and then she saw it: an ordinary hook-and-eye catch, painted dull black like the frame around it. Panting, she shoved the stepladder across the floor, clambered up it.

She was careless placing her weight, felt the ladder's right-side feet leave the floor, come back to ground with a crash as she shifted back. The hook was jammed tight, and she had to climb down, reverse the motor, then climb back up again before she could release it.

Once more into the breach, dear friends. If it didn't work this time, she'd just fire away and be damned.

But it did. Creaking, protesting, showering her with tiny bits of paint, the skylight slid open.

"Miz Tolliver!"

Magdalen jumped away from the wall switch as if it had scorched her, turning as she did so. In the doorway, sputtering with rage, stood Mrs. Webb. "I told you about that skylight . . . ," she began, ran out of words for her indignation. Amazingly, the mortar had not caught her eye, but now it did. "What is that . . . that *thing*?" she demanded. "Oh, my God, it's a—"

Magdalen fired the pistol through the fabric of her coat, as she had in Wichita, but this time she was not so lucky. The bullet missed Mrs. Webb by a foot, buried itself in the plaster wall.

But its target froze in her tracks, eyes bulging in terror, as Magdalen took out the pistol, aimed carefully, and shot her landlady clean through the heart.

Even before Mrs. Webb's body had crumpled to the floor, the newly installed phone began to ring. Magdalen looked to her watch, picked up the receiver. "That you, Top?" she said.

"Roger." He sounded a little stronger, or maybe it was just wishful thinking. "Everything all right at your end?"

Magdalen regarded Mrs. Webb with satisfaction. "Just fine," she said.

"They're starting to go in the Capitol," he said. "All the mucky-mucks in their limos."

"The more the merrier," said Magdalen. She felt utterly calm. This was going to be a hit.

Above, unseen through the painted shade, a helicopter labored past.

44. Diana

5:30 P.M.

The photo expert, an army captain, tossed down the stack of enlargements. "This is the last batch," he said. "Unless we got lights or infrared." Two master sergeants, radiating silent disapproval in the manner of cats and aged butlers, swooped down and began laying out the eight-by-tens in their proper places on the long folding tables, matching them to shots taken earlier in the day.

It might be the last batch anyway, Diana thought. In the corner of the empty hangar at Washington National, an oversize TV screen was tuned to the warm-up feed from the House chamber. The camera panned absently across an acre of schmoozing politicos, a panorama of self-importance. Not a person in the House chamber, Diana knew, would be unaware of the TV cameras or indifferent to the angle at which he (or, rarely, she) was being captured by those omnivorous lenses.

In a few minutes all the cameras would fix on the same target as the president mounted the rostrum to begin his annual accounting of his stewardship. Diana wondered if Mag-

dalen were watching this preparation, decided it wasn't likely. Wherever she was, she'd be busy arranging her own performance.

Wherever. That was the question, and as the afternoon had slid past, Diana could feel the eyes on her back. Woody had set up the helicopter surveillance, rounded up the photo personnel, set up the evaluation tables—used every ounce of influence he possessed. Much of the effort seemed to be on a volunteer basis, buddies of Woody's who'd heard he needed help and found a free couple of hours or even a whole afternoon to contribute.

Diana found herself impressed by the amount of quiet competence on display. The search helicopter had covered the entire area east of the Capitol, from north of Union Station to south of Garfield Park, east as far as Lincoln Square. Every rooftop, no matter how unlikely, received from two to four photographic passes at minimum altitude (less than minimum, until the D.C. police threatened a formal complaint to the FAA).

The photographs—processed, enlarged, examined—piled up along the tables, laid out to represent the grid of streets. Nothing. As the hours passed Diana could feel the morale around her start to shred. Who could blame them? she thought. Working in the dark, not knowing even exactly what they were looking for, without the spur of official approval.

Twice there had been a ripple as a high-ranking face looked quickly in, appraised the scene, and disappeared. The second time it happened, Diana said: "I thought the brass wasn't in on this, Woody."

By then he had sunk well into a slough of personal despond. "They aren't," he said. "They know what's going on, but not officially. Once it's official, I'm dead."

He was trying to keep his spirits up, though. "I never saw so many roofs in my life," he called to her across three tables. "Or so many people doing weird things outdoors in January."

Woody was right on that one, she thought. Including one couple, stark naked, making love at forty-five degrees Fahren-

heit. The observer in the helo had got four different shots of that scene, and his subjects never even looked up.

Diana was edging down the row of tables, magnifying glass dangling from one hand, as she scanned the glossies for something—anything—out of the ordinary. The hand-printed sign on the table before her read SIXTH ST. SE: ECAP.—INDEPENDENCE. Two photos caught her eye, and she paused to look at them. After a moment's thought she set them side by side.

"That's not right, ma'am," said the sergeant standing at her back. "First print underneath, second on top."

"But look at the damn things," she said, jolted into annoyance by his calm superiority. "These can't be the same place."

"Ma'am, they are," he replied patiently. "Same place, hour and a half apart, just like the date-time stamp says."

She found herself wanting to scream in his smug, flat face, grab his shoulders, and shake some humanity into him. Instead she drew in a long, shuddering breath and turned back to the black-and-white prints before her. The first was stamped 1430—2:30 P.M.—and showed a bare, flat roof surfaced with what looked like asphalt sheeting. Half the center of it was occupied by a paned skylight, below which was a large room, bare except for a stepladder against one wall and a shapeless lump in the center, perhaps an artist's easel, shrouded in a dropcloth.

Diana had to admit that the second photo, whose stamp read 1605, seemed to show the same roof, with the same skylight set into it. But the room below was entirely different; instead of an obviously unoccupied studio, this was a place people were living in: fully furnished, comfortable, and even cozy. She pointed out the discrepancy to the sergeant, who retreated in good military order to the identifying stamps on the two shots: these were the same building on Southeast Sixth Street—couldn't she read what it said?

Diana's raised voice (the sergeant's never changed its calm, monotonic pitch) drew first Woody, almost gray with anxiety,

and then a rather elderly major with a condescending smile, who produced a loupe and set it down on the earlier photo.

"Nobody," Diana said through gritted teeth, "settles into an apartment in an hour and thirty-five minutes. I mean"—she pitched her voice up, and the sergeant's mouth snapped shut—"it may be technically feasible to move the furniture, but living human beings don't work that way."

"Maybe the stamp is wrong," Woody suggested.

The sergeant bristled. "Sir, that isn't possible. I checked it against the helo traffic schedule."

The elderly major slid his loupe across to the second print, quietly pushing Diana out of the way as he did so.

A couple of warrant officers in flight suits had wandered into the hangar and began to drift closer. "There is something wrong with one of those pictures," Diana insisted, hearing the strain in her voice.

"She's right." The hoarse tenor seemed to come from just below Diana's elbow, and then its owner straightened up. The elderly major was red-faced with excitement as he addressed Woody: "Sir, this is some kind of scenery—anyway, it's two-dimensional. Look at it with this glass."

"Never mind the glass," said Woody. "I'll take your word for it." And to the sergeant: "Where is this place?"

* * *

"Get in!" called Woody. "We've got to haul ass, girl." He was on the army sedan's front seat, from which he'd just ejected the enlisted driver. The young soldier was waving a sheet of paper at his superior and seemed to be on the verge of furious tears.

"Not without Eric," Diana replied. "And who the hell are you—the Lone Ranger?"

"I'm a staff officer who smells promotion," Woody snapped. "We'll pick up your boyfriend on the way out of the lot."

When the sedan screeched up, Eric was standing by the

rented car with his back ostentatiously toward them. Sulking, Diana thought—and no wonder, after being exiled to the coldest, darkest corner of the parking lot for three and a half hours. ("This is the longest shot I ever played," Woody had explained half apologetically. "I can't afford to have you hanging off me. Not in front of everybody.")

But he turned and, when Diana shouted, "The game's afoot," climbed silently into the backseat. There was no time for her to worry about Eric's state of mind. Woody Dawkins was a fast, careless, uncoordinated driver at the best of times, and now his blood was up. Diana sat braced in one corner of the front seat as he skidded the four-door sedan diagonally onto George Washington Parkway, then floored the accelerator.

"We've got a fifteen-minute head start," he said, yanking the car into the fast lane. A chorus of horns from behind blared and faded as he continued: "Busload of Special Forces guys'll be coming up behind us, so whatever you're going to do, you'd better do it fast." He tramped on the brake to avoid going over the top of a taxi ahead, leaned on his horn to no avail.

"Assuming," Eric said from the backseat, "that we're in time. And at the right place."

Woody's only acknowledgment was to accelerate again. If he meant to nudge the taxi ahead, his distance judgment was badly off. The sedan's bumper crushed the taxi's brake lights with a crunch of glass just audible over the other sounds that filled the car. The cab swerved right, starting to spin, and as it flashed past Diana saw the driver give them a last, defiant finger.

Without releasing her grip on seat back and dashboard, she turned her head to look at Eric. He was leaning back, in the center of the rear seat, and Diana guessed his knees must be jammed against the seat back in front of him. His face was set like iron, but maybe it was something in her expression that made his lips suddenly twitch, then stretch in a helpless grin. "Hell of a way to go," he said.

"What was that?" Woody shouted.

"He said you're the worst driver he's ever seen," said Diana. "Now, what's the plan?" But her attention was fixed on the headlights behind them, a single pair that tracked with them from lane to lane, matching Woody's lunatic bursts of speed with professional skill.

Not a bus, she thought. A car like the one they were in. But driven by whom, and to what purpose?

45. Szabo

ARLINGTON MEMORIAL BRIDGE; 6:00 P.M.

Had she spotted it? Eric had positioned himself to see the rearview mirror (and to block Woody's own view of it), and the following car was much too close by any normal standard of tailing—but the usual rules didn't apply when you were trying to keep up with an army colonel crazed by the prospect of a star.

The sedan shot up Independence Avenue, and at last Woody had thought to switch on the car's roof flasher. Up ahead, probably at First Street, traffic was being shunted off to the right, away from the brightly lit Capitol. No red flasher was going to get them through that. Just as Eric was about to say so, Woody swung the wheel hard. The heavy car spun completely around, steadied up, and shot off down Third, tires squealing in outrage.

Eric couldn't see anyone behind them, and he cursed under his breath. In front Diana was shouting, "Left on C! Left on C!" At the last instant, or maybe a millisecond past it, the

car yawed left, leaped the curb, and bounced across the pavement onto C Street, heading east.

* * *

The sedan was still slowing when Diana's door flew open and she leaped out. Earlier in the day she had changed into dark slacks and sneakers: the rubber soles squealed like tires as she skidded on the concrete, caught her balance, and took off toward the faintly gleaming fanlight fifty yards down the empty street.

Apparently thrown off by her action, Woody tramped on the brake, and Eric, reaching for the door handle, was thrown heavily against the front seat. He was pulling himself upright when he caught a dull, metallic gleam from the corner of his eye and froze where he was, awkwardly off balance.

"Good thinking," Woody rumbled.

Slowly Eric swung his head until he saw it clearly. In Woody's huge dark hand the Beretta looked almost like a toy, but the muzzle, pointed squarely at Eric's face, seemed an inch across. "What is this?" Eric demanded.

"It's her play," Woody replied. "Anyway, three of us busting into there could set the whole thing off." His smile was only barely visible under the streetlight. "But that doesn't mean we can't follow along quietly."

Quietly, it turned out, meant shoeless. By the time they reached the open front door, Eric's feet felt as if they'd been scorched rather than frozen. A dark plastic oblong, bent and cracked, gleamed on the carpet just inside the door, and Eric bent to scoop it up: Diana's American Airlines frequent flyer card—and emergency door opener.

Woody's pistol nudged at his back. He started up the stairs, taking them two at a time and keeping his weight as close to the wall as possible. At the fourth-floor landing he heard voices from above. No, one voice—a woman's, taut and angry, but he couldn't quite make out the words.

Side by side the two men edged up the last flight of stairs. No carpet on these, and the wood was old. With every step Eric's heart seemed to pause.

The voice was clearer now. A trained voice, Eric thought, and one he had heard before, though on tape and in a very different role. Woody, looking at him, mouthed, "That her?" and Eric nodded.

"You say he sent you, but can you prove it?" the voice was saying. Not nervous or afraid, Eric thought. By God, she's enjoying herself.

A murmur of response. Eric, on his hands and knees, could see the doorway now, and it was empty. So Diana had at least got inside the room.

"So you say. Why should he suddenly care now?" Magdalen demanded.

Diana was answering again, a measured, soothing, time-consuming reply, and Eric used the sound to cover his painful movement up another step. Now his head was level with the landing, and Woody was slightly behind him. Through the doorway he saw something move, realized it was a reflection in a window. It wasn't clear enough for him to tell who was being reflected or exactly where they were standing.

Magdalen laughed. Harsh and humorless. "I'm sorry," she said. "I rather like you."

Eric could hear it coming: the flat finality in her voice gave her away. He was on his feet with a wordless yell as the lights inside the room suddenly went out. He took the last two steps in a bound and leaped for the doorway, legs pumping. His head was down, and somehow he had time to wonder if his momentum would carry him into Magdalen after her bullet hit him.

Simultaneous flash/crash of a handgun, blinding and ear-splitting in the confined space. And another. A streak of fire burned down his back as he crashed into a figure already staggering and off balance. He grappled with a chunky, power-

ful female body. Perfume, but not Diana's, streaked the gunsmoke.

A third explosion: he heard the gun, but it seemed to go off in his head. He felt himself sliding helplessly to the floor, unable to make his arms or legs obey him.

* * *

Light. His head felt as if it had split. An arm was supporting him, a strong, slender, familiar arm. And this time the perfume was definitely Diana's. He wanted to ask what had happened, but he couldn't seem to make his lips move. He wanted to see Diana's face, but the best he could do was a pink blur. "Easy, tiger. We did it," she said.

Eric had the sense that the room was full of people. No one speaking, but whispered orders, the shuffling of many feet, coughings, and throat clearings.

"Get her out of here," said a familiar voice. So Bernie had turned up after all.

Suddenly the room snapped into focus, or nearly. In the middle of it, stark and triangular and purposeful, the mortar angled upward. A tangle of projectiles, like tiny rocket ships, lay about it. Some were labeled *HE* in black stencil. The others, fitted with odd-looking fins, had lettering Eric couldn't read from where he lay.

Woody was nowhere to be seen, but Magdalen Tyrrell, wearing a dark jumpsuit, was struggling, silently and ineffectually, in the grasp of Van Bronk and another heavy who looked like his cousin. She was red-faced, with a bruise already shaping on her cheek. "Enough," she said.

She had stopped trying to break free, and Van Bronk looked to Bernie, swaddled to the chin in a checked overcoat.

"Miss Tyrrell, your father has sent a plane for you," Bernie said. "It would be easier all around if you walked down the stairs."

"All right," she said. "Just let me say good-bye first."

"Good-bye? To whom?"

She pointed to the black telephone lying on its side on the floor. The receiver was off the cradle. "My friend."

"Some kind of trick," said Van Bronk.

Bernie seemed undecided, and suddenly from just above Eric's head he heard Diana's voice. "Let her." She sounded exhausted.

"You think so? All right." With awkward, mincing little steps Bernie stepped across the room, picked up the handset. "Hello? . . . Hello? . . ." To Magdalen: "I'm sorry, there's no one—"

Even from halfway across the room the rasping roar of sound was startling. The handset leaped from Bernie's grasp and crashed to the bare wood.

"Some good-bye," Van Bronk said to the room at large. He turned to Bernie: "We'd better get going. That soldier boy won't be able to hold his troops back forever."

Bernie seemed stunned, unable to speak. Diana said, "Get out of here."

Van Bronk and his partner started to hustle Magdalen out the door, but she twisted in their grasp, addressed Diana: "I want my handbag. Please."

A flash of premonition cut through Eric's half daze. He started to speak, felt Diana's long fingers close on his bicep.

"Yes," said Diana. "You'll need it." She eased Eric back to the floor. He couldn't even raise his head, just turn it to see Diana pick up a large black shoulder bag. She held it for perhaps five seconds, her face pale and set, then handed it to the other woman.

Magdalen Tyrrell accepted it gravely, but without a word. She looked up at Van Bronk. "All right."

Eric heard the three of them going down the stairs, knew there was something he had to say, but Diana was on her knees at his side, her long forefinger across his lips.

"What is it?" Bernie asked fretfully, but neither of them

answered him. Eric heard the front door slam and, a minute later, the very different slam of a car door, the sound of the engine.

And maybe five seconds later, the hoarse, throaty roar of the grenade.

46. Diana

GRAND CENTRAL STATION, LOWER LEVEL; MONDAY AFTERNOON

She pulled off her gloves as she came into *Utopia Parkway*'s salon. Knowing better than to wait for her employer to invite her to sit down, she dropped wearily onto the chair across the desk from where he sat. He looked up from the papers on his desk. For the first time in their three-year acquaintance his yellow-pupiled eyes were streaked with red.

"I suppose it was for the best," he said. She could tell he didn't believe it. And didn't yet forgive her.

"It was what she wanted," Diana replied. I owed it to her, she thought. For those last few minutes, I might have been Magdalen, or she Diana. No one would ever understand that.

"You disobeyed me, start to finish," the Rajah added thoughtfully. "But I can see now: Eric Szabo couldn't handle it."

In times past Diana would have accepted his judgment, especially when it was to her advantage. Today she was just

too tired. No, too rebellious. "Eric couldn't handle it with the little you told him," she said.

The lion's eyes regarded her reflectively. Here it comes. "You're right," he said. "I was misled by . . . emotion." He sounded surprised and annoyed.

Diana decided none of the several remarks that occurred to her would be helpful. She waited.

"Speaking of Eric Szabo, he seems to have dropped out of sight. I hope he's recovering."

You mean you hope he hasn't sold his story to *Hard Copy*. "I gather he's doing well," she said.

"You know where he is, then?"

"In my secretary's bed," Diana replied calmly. "She decided he had an aura that was propitious for her. Mental tan, I think she called it."

The Rajah almost never laughed aloud. About the closest he came—as now—was a toss of his shaggy head and a snort of amusement. "That clearly doesn't bother you," he observed, and added before she could reply, "Nor should it."

She could feel the ice creaking under her feet, decided it was time to change the subject. "Mr. Thomas resigned today," she said. "Though *abdicated* would be a better word for his performance. I told him to get back to his desk."

"Yes," said the Rajah. "He talked to me as well." Now he was the one who seemed uncomfortable. "Tell me," he said, "how did you know he was the one who wrote those letters—about you and Mr. Szabo?"

"Oh, that. Well, there were only three possible authors. Haskell Rose, Tim Mark, and Maury. And I knew it wasn't an editor."

She let him work it out, and he did: "From the note itself, I take it. The one Mr. Szabo showed you."

"Exactly. Do you still have a copy?"

He did, of course—the second sheet down. He passed it over to her. She took out her pen and made two small

additions, passed it back. He read it aloud, supplying the punctuation with his voice: " 'Diana Speed has put her lover, Szabo, on your payroll.' Two commas told you it was Mr. Thomas?"

"The lack of two commas told me it wasn't an editor," she said.

He nodded: subject closed. But she couldn't allow the opportunity to pass. "You do know why all that happened," she said. "Book publishing, like nature, abhors a vacuum."

"The Wild-Freeman presidency. Yes." The Rajah pursed his lips as if considering whether to continue, and she had the strongest sensation that he'd made his decision. But when he spoke, he said only, "It's under advisement," and then: "Your Colonel Dawkins will get his star, I understand. But he will be reassigned—to the Near East, they say."

Win some, lose some, she was thinking, when he continued: "And what about you? Certainly the Republic owes you as much as it owes him."

"Did you watch the State of the Union speech last night?" she asked.

His nose wrinkled in mild disgust. "I managed to endure a few minutes—like everyone else, I suppose."

"And you still think the Republic owes me?"

This time he did laugh aloud.

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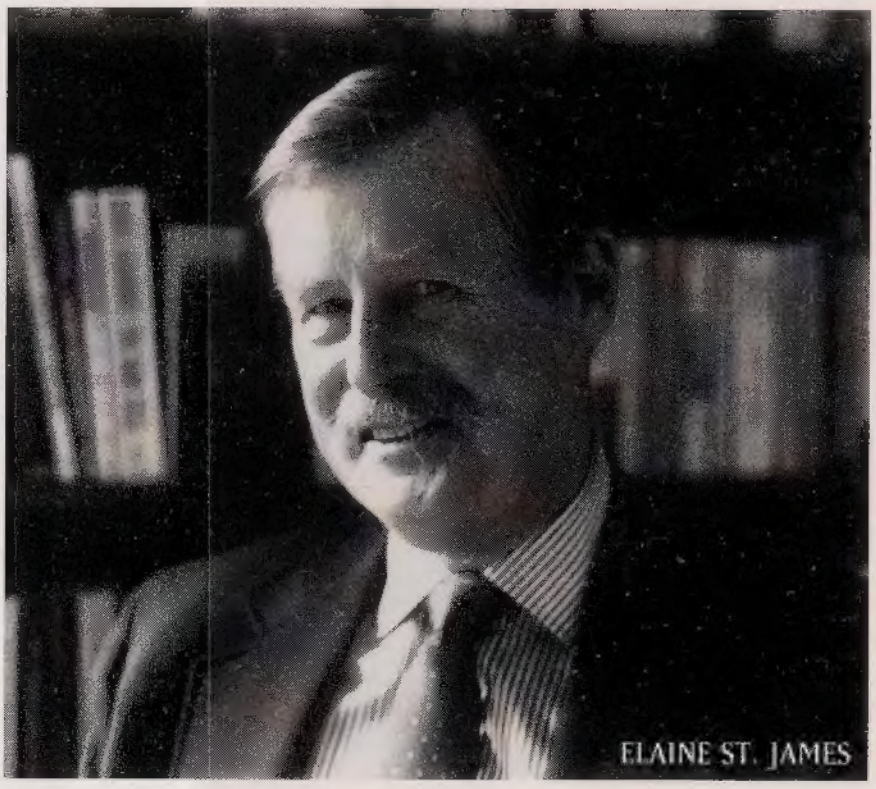

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